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Curriculum Reform and Graduate Employability in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

Graduate employability has become a major policy concern in developing countries where the expansion of higher education has not always been matched by the creation of suitable employment opportunities or the development of labour-market-relevant competencies. This article examines the relationship between curriculum reform and graduate employability, focusing on how higher education institutions can respond to technological change, shifting occupational structures, employer expectations, and the socioeconomic realities of developing economies. Drawing on international literature and policy frameworks, the article argues that graduate employability should not be treated as a narrow measure of immediate job placement. Instead, it should encompass disciplinary knowledge, transferable skills, digital competence, career-management capacity, adaptability, professional identity, ethical awareness, and the ability to create employment through entrepreneurship. The analysis identifies several weaknesses in conventional university curricula, including excessive theoretical content, limited practical exposure, outdated course materials, weak assessment practices, inadequate employer participation, and insufficient attention to communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and digital skills. Five interconnected areas of reform are discussed: addressing curriculum–labour-market misalignment; adopting competency-based and digitally responsive curricula; strengthening industry–academia collaboration and work-integrated learning; ensuring contextual relevance and equitable access; and establishing effective governance, quality assurance, and graduate-tracking mechanisms. The article concludes that curriculum reform can improve graduate employability only when it is supported by trained faculty, institutional resources, employer participation, student career services, reliable labour-market information, and periodic evaluation.

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Introduction:

Higher education has expanded rapidly across many developing countries as governments and families increasingly view university education as a pathway to social mobility, professional advancement, and economic development. However, the growing number of degree holders has not always resulted in a corresponding increase in appropriate graduate-level employment. Many graduates experience unemployment, prolonged job searches, underemployment, informal employment, or employment in occupations unrelated to their fields of study. These outcomes have raised questions about whether university curricula are sufficiently responsive to changing labour-market conditions. Graduate unemployment cannot be attributed exclusively to weaknesses in higher education. Macroeconomic instability, low investment, limited industrial development, political uncertainty, informality, technological disruption, regional inequality, and insufficient creation of high-productivity jobs also influence employment outcomes. Nevertheless, higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure that their graduates possess the knowledge, competencies, attitudes, and adaptive capacity required to navigate such challenging environments. Skills mismatch occurs when the skills possessed by workers differ from those demanded by available occupations. The mismatch may involve insufficient skills, excessive qualifications, inappropriate fields of study, or limited opportunities to apply acquired competencies. The International Labour Organization emphasizes that skills mismatch is multidimensional and that policy responses should distinguish among its different forms rather than treating it as a single problem. In Pakistan, the World Bank has identified gaps between educational attainment, skills development, and employment opportunities. Research using Pakistani labour-market information has also indicated that the number of suitable vacancies for bachelor's and graduate degree holders may be insufficient and that over qualification can occur when highly educated applicants compete for lower-level positions. Curriculum reform is therefore central to the employability debate. It refers not simply to adding or removing courses but to reconsidering learning outcomes, course content, teaching practices, assessment systems, practical experience, career preparation, digital learning, and relationships between universities and society. UNESCO describes curriculum as involving the design, organization, and planning of educational activities, indicating that meaningful reform must address the entire learning process rather than the syllabus alone.

Curriculum–Labour-Market Misalignment and the Graduate Skills Gap:

One of the most frequently identified weaknesses in higher education is the gap between what universities teach and what employers require. Traditional curricula are often organized around disciplinary content, lectures, textbook knowledge, and written examinations. Although disciplinary knowledge remains essential, employers increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, digital literacy, creativity, adaptability, and professional behavior. Curriculum misalignment may occur because formal revision processes are slow. A programme may remain unchanged for several years even though technologies, occupational practices, regulatory requirements, and business models are changing rapidly. By the time a revised programme is approved and implemented, some technical content may already require further updating. Institutional isolation is another source of misalignment. Curriculum committees may consist mainly of academics, with limited participation from employers, professional bodies, entrepreneurs, alumni, community organizations, or recent graduates. Consequently, curriculum decisions may reflect disciplinary traditions more strongly than workplace realities. The World Bank has observed that curricula can evolve more slowly than economies and those universities have not always been designed with sufficient employer participation. The employability gap should not be reduced to technical skills alone. Research has shown that employers often place substantial importance on interpersonal capabilities, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and professional attitudes. Finch and colleagues found that employers considered soft skills highly important when evaluating new graduates, while academic reputation was comparatively less influential. Similarly, Andrews and

Hinson emphasized the need for graduates to combine disciplinary or business knowledge with soft skills and relevant work experience. This suggests that employability is created through the interaction of knowledge, behavior, experience, self-awareness, and contextual understanding. Universities should therefore conduct regular programmer reviews using employer surveys, graduate tracer studies, vacancy analyses, occupational forecasts, accreditation requirements, and consultation with professional associations. These sources should not determine the curriculum mechanically, because universities also serve intellectual, civic, ethical, and research purposes. However, labour-market evidence can help institutions identify obsolete content, missing competencies, and emerging professional fields.

Competency-Based and Digitally Responsive Curriculum Design:

A competency-based curriculum organizes education around what students should be able to understand, perform, create, evaluate, and communicate by the end of a programme. It shifts attention from the amount of content delivered by teachers to the capabilities demonstrated by students. Competency-based reform should begin with clearly defined programme learning outcomes. These outcomes may include disciplinary knowledge, research ability, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, digital literacy, teamwork, ethical decision-making, leadership, creativity, and problem-solving. Individual courses should then contribute progressively to these outcomes, while assessments should provide evidence that students have achieved them. Pakistan's Higher Education Commission requires higher education institutions to implement its Undergraduate Education Policy and has emphasized competency-based learning, balanced programme structures, practical learning, and student success. Its national quality-assurance framework also includes academic programmes, curricula, research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and industrial linkages among the areas that institutions should evaluate. Digital responsiveness is particularly important. Graduates across disciplines increasingly require the ability to use digital platforms, analyse information, communicate online, protect data, evaluate digital sources, and adapt to new technologies. Digital competence should not be confined to computer science programmes. Business students may need data visualization and enterprise software; social-science students may require statistical and qualitative analysis tools; education graduates may need learning-management systems; and health graduates may require familiarity with digital records and telehealth environments. However, digital curriculum reform should extend beyond teaching software packages. Specific software can become obsolete, whereas broader competencies—such as data interpretation, computational reasoning, ethical technology use, cyber security awareness, and independent learning—remain transferable. Students should understand both the opportunities and risks associated with artificial intelligence, automation, platform work, digital surveillance, misinformation, and algorithmic decision-making. Assessment practices must also change. Written examinations can evaluate certain forms of knowledge, but they may not adequately measure collaboration, creativity, professional judgment, or practical problem-solving. Authentic assessment methods may include case studies, portfolios, simulations, consultancy projects, presentations, prototypes, policy briefs, laboratory tasks, field investigations, and community-based assignments.

Industry–Academia Collaboration and Work-Integrated Learning:

Industry–academia collaboration can provide universities with current information about occupational requirements while enabling employers to contribute to the education of future professionals. Such collaboration may include employer representation on curriculum committees, guest lectures, joint research projects, professional mentoring, workplace visits, internships, apprenticeships, consulting assignments, innovation laboratories, and collaborative assessment. Work-integrated learning is particularly valuable because it allows students to apply academic concepts in professional environments. It may take the form of internships, clinical placements, teaching practice, cooperative education, fieldwork, supervised projects, or simulated workplace activities. Jackson's research demonstrates that work-integrated learning can support employability-skill development, although its effectiveness depends on programme design, workplace

supervision, institutional coordination, student preparation, and opportunities for reflection. Internships should therefore be treated as structured academic experiences rather than informal requirements completed without adequate monitoring. Before entering a workplace, students should receive guidance on professional conduct, communication, workplace safety, confidentiality, teamwork, and learning objectives. During the placement, supervisors should provide feedback and meaningful tasks. After the experience, students should reflect on the competencies they developed, the problems they encountered, and the relationship between academic knowledge and professional practice. Developing countries face particular challenges in expanding work-integrated learning. Universities may be located far from major employers, while small businesses may lack the capacity to supervise interns. Some employers may use interns for routine unpaid work rather than meaningful learning. Students from low-income families may also be unable to accept unpaid placements that require transportation, accommodation, or professional clothing. Universities can address these constraints through shorter project-based placements, virtual internships, community-based projects, campus enterprises, multidisciplinary consulting assignments, and partnerships with public institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Public funding or employer incentives may also be necessary to ensure that financially disadvantaged students can participate.

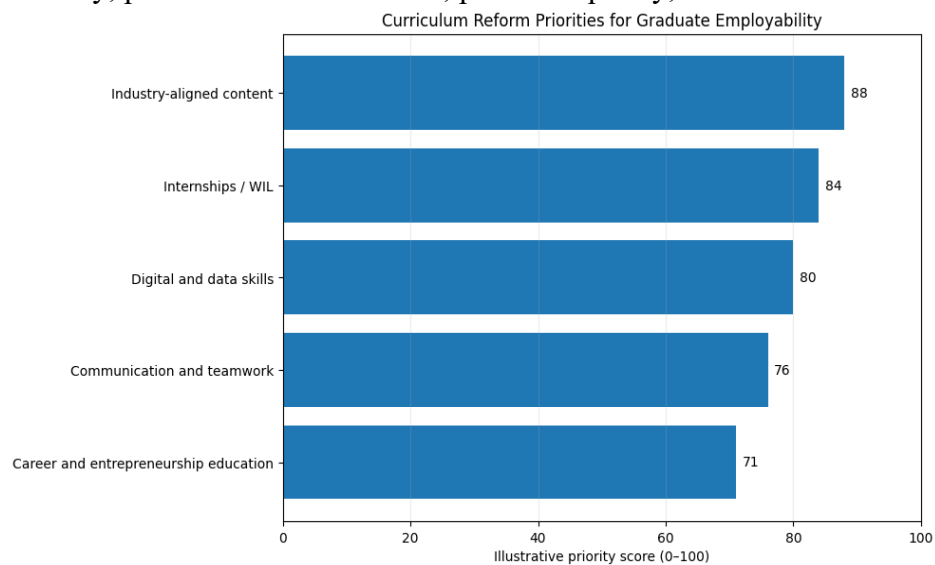
Contextual Relevance, Entrepreneurship, and Inclusive Employability:

Curriculum reform models developed in high-income countries cannot always be transferred directly to developing economies. Labour markets differ in their industrial structures, levels of informality, public-sector employment, technological capacity, regulatory environments, and availability of graduate-level occupations. In economies where formal employment creation is limited, entrepreneurship and self-employment education become important components of employability. However, entrepreneurship should not be taught only as business-plan writing. Students require experience in identifying social and market problems, testing ideas, understanding customers, managing finances, using digital marketing, complying with regulations, and evaluating risk. Entrepreneurial learning can be integrated across disciplines. Agriculture students may develop value-added products, education students may design learning services, engineering students may construct prototypes, and social-science students may establish community enterprises. Incubation centers, seed-funding competitions, mentoring networks, and university–community partnerships can help convert academic projects into viable initiatives. Contextual relevance also requires attention to local and indigenous knowledge. Curricula should prepare graduates for global professional standards while enabling them to address national and community challenges. Problems related to water, energy, public health, agriculture, education, urbanization, disaster management, gender inequality, and social inclusion can be incorporated into project-based learning. Employability opportunities are not distributed equally. Women, rural students, persons with disabilities, low-income learners, and students attending under-resourced institutions may face additional barriers. Curriculum reform that introduces expensive technology or compulsory unpaid internships without financial support may unintentionally increase inequality. Inclusive employability requires accessible digital resources, flexible placement arrangements, disability accommodations, career counseling, language support, mentoring, and targeted financial assistance. Universities should also recognize that social networks and professional contacts influence graduate opportunities. Career events, alumni mentoring, employer engagement, and supervised professional networking can help students who do not have family connections in professional sectors. Tomlinson's graduate-capital perspective explains employability through several interconnected forms of capital, including human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological resources. This approach is particularly relevant in developing countries because graduates with similar qualifications may experience different employment outcomes depending on their networks, confidence, geographic location, language ability, financial resources, and familiarity with professional cultures. Career-management education should therefore be embedded throughout the degree rather than offered only during the final semester. Bridgstock

argues that career-building and self-management abilities are important graduate attributes that are frequently overlooked in university programmers. Students should learn how to identify opportunities, prepare professional applications, build portfolios, communicate their competencies, interpret labour-market information, and manage changing career pathways.

Governance, Implementation, and Evaluation of Curriculum Reform:

Curriculum reform often fails because institutions focus on policy documents without providing the resources required for implementation. A revised curriculum may contain innovative learning outcomes while teaching remains lecture-centered and assessment remains based on memorization. Sustainable reform therefore requires changes in faculty development, institutional governance, infrastructure, assessment, student support, and quality assurance. Faculty members need training in competency-based teaching, authentic assessment, digital learning, inclusive education, industry collaboration, and project supervision. They may also require reduced workloads, technical assistance, teaching resources, and recognition for educational innovation. Without institutional support, curriculum reform can become an additional administrative burden rather than a meaningful academic improvement. Governance arrangements should clearly identify who is responsible for curriculum monitoring. Programmed committees, departments, quality-enhancement cells, career centers, employer advisory boards, and accreditation bodies should coordinate their activities rather than operating independently. Graduate tracer studies are essential for evaluation. Universities should collect information about employment status, job-search duration, occupation, sector, and income range, relevance of employment to the degree, further education, entrepreneurship, and graduate perceptions of curriculum quality. Employer feedback should examine graduate performance rather than general impressions of universities. Employment rates should not be used as the sole indicator of curriculum effectiveness. They are affected by economic conditions, location, gender, social background, and the availability of jobs. Evaluation should therefore use multiple indicators, including competency achievement, internship quality, employer satisfaction, graduate career progression, entrepreneurial activity, professional certification, portfolio quality, and access to further education.



Note: Conceptual synthesis based on the reviewed literature; not original survey data.

Summary:

Curriculum reform has become necessary because higher education systems in many developing countries are operating within rapidly changing economic, technological, and social environments. The expansion of

university enrolment has increased expectations that degrees will lead to secure and meaningful employment. However, many graduates continue to experience unemployment, underemployment, skills mismatch, or prolonged transitions from education to work. The evidence reviewed in this article demonstrates that graduate employability is multidimensional. It depends on disciplinary expertise, transferable skills, digital literacy, professional experience, career-management ability, social networks, confidence, identity, adaptability, and access to labour-market opportunities. Consequently, employability should not be treated as the responsibility of a single career-services office or a final-semester course. Five areas of curriculum reform are particularly important. First, universities must identify and reduce misalignment between curricula and changing occupational requirements. Second, programmers should adopt competency-based learning outcomes and digitally responsive teaching and assessment. Third, work-integrated learning and employer collaboration should be embedded systematically within degree programmers. Fourth, reform should reflect local economic conditions, support entrepreneurship, and ensure that disadvantaged students can access employability opportunities. Fifth, universities and governments should strengthen governance, faculty development, quality assurance, labour-market information, and graduate-tracking systems. Curriculum reform alone cannot solve unemployment where economies fail to create sufficient productive jobs. Universities should therefore avoid promising that every curriculum change will lead directly to employment. Nevertheless, relevant and well-implemented curricula can improve graduates' ability to compete for available opportunities, adapt to occupational change, create enterprises, continue learning, and contribute productively to society. For developing countries, the most effective approach is continuous curriculum renewal rather than infrequent revision. Universities should regularly analyses labour-market developments, consult stakeholders, evaluate graduate outcomes, update teaching practices, and support faculty members in implementing change. Curriculum relevance must be balanced with academic depth, ethical education, citizenship, research, and critical thinking.

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