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Employers Perception of Factors Determining Business Graduates' Employability: Evidence from Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study set out to determine the factors that employers look for when recruiting business school graduates in Saudi Arabia. To attain this aim, a structured questionnaire was distributed to 250 employers in the regions of Riyadh and Qassim in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. 135 copies were returned, constituting a 54% usable response rate. The output of the questionnaire analyses showed that employers assign importance to knowledge, hard and soft skills, and the ability to work within groups. However, employers attach high importance to the ability of the job applicants to work within groups and to their soft skills. The questionnaire analyses further revealed that the level of importance that employers attach to employability factors such as hard and soft skills, and their ability to work in groups is affected by the employers' age, the place from where they obtained their last academic qualification, and the years of work experience.

Keywords: Employers, Business Graduates, Employability, Skills, Saudi Arabia.

JEL codes: J21, J24, J29

Introduction

The link between the quality of skills attained by business school graduates and the ability to find the right job has been subject to growing theoretical and empirical testing in the education literature. The literature focuses mainly on identifying employers' perceptions about the quality of hard and soft skills of the university's graduates⁴.

Hence, both business schools and employers must work closely on modifying the education curricula to ascertain that the graduates possess the qualifications and skills necessary to obtain and maintain the job in the long-run. This will help in supplying the labor market with a qualified and trained labor force necessary to achieve sustainable development. Therefore, it is vital to uncover the qualifications and skills that employers expect to have in business graduates. This will help graduates find quick job opportunities, reducing dependence on foreign labor and unemployment, raising living standards, and achieving economic and social development in an oil-producing country like Saudi Arabia which heavily depends on a foreign labor force.

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⁴ While soft skills help with some of the demands of many jobs, they are insufficient to retain the jobs since they require hard skills.



Thus, this study set out to detect the features of Saudi business graduates that employers expect them to possess to secure and maintain their jobs. The outcome of this study is expected to contribute to the development of the education strategy in a way that helps in providing a qualified and skillful workforce commensurate with the local labor market requirements. It will help in creating new entrepreneurs, reducing unemployment, raising the standard of living, and accelerating the achievement of sustainable economic and social development. While soft skills are generally universal, unquantifiable, and not applied to specific jobs (i.e. communication, leadership, persuasion, problem-solving abilities, motivation, teamwork, work ethic, time management), hard skills are quantifiable talents and abilities usually applied to specific jobs (i.e. an academic degree or certificate, computer programming, Proficiency in a foreign language, typing speed). development goals. The result of this study is further expected to help employers find the appropriate manpower to ensure optimal use of their resources, increase productivity, reduce costs, and increase profitability. Furthermore, the outcome of this study would encourage additional academic researchers and career developers to explore new creative teaching methodologies that accelerate attaining career development skills. Finally, the outcomes of this study are anticipated to add a new dimension to the field of research on the factors that help in the rapid recruitment of Saudi business graduates. The economic features of Saudi Arabia as well as other GCC countries are unique since they are rich oil-exporting countries with high per capita income. The public sectors in these countries play a significant role in economic activity and governments are making strenuous efforts to diversify their economy and give the private sector a greater role in the process of economic development.

The remainder of the study will be organized as follows: Section 2 comprises a review of the related research and hypotheses development. Section 3 describes data collection and study methodology. While the findings are offered in section four, the conclusion, limitations, and directions for future research are considered in the final section.

Related Research and Study Hypotheses

Several studies have been undertaken to determine the features that boost business graduates' employability. Employability to Yorke (2006) is a set of personal characteristics, skills, and achievements that assist them in finding jobs and retaining them. Graduates' knowledge, skills, and abilities required by employers have been examined by Graham (2001), who found that they need to exhibit the ability to work within groups and demonstrate leadership, dedication, and initiation more than what they do currently. The researcher further noticed that employers consider presentation skills, listening, verbal expression, and understanding instructions to be very important. However, Weligamage and Siengthai (2003) claimed that the key skills acquired by university graduates and demanded by employers are not clear. They further declared that universities do not create the required labor skills and graduates are not familiar with the real labor market. The researchers believe that the gap between job requirements and skills leads to more unemployable graduates. Hodges and Burchell (2003) explored employers' opinions about the extent to which business graduates are prepared to join the workplace. The study revealed that employers concentrate on graduates' soft skills and their ability to handle thoughtfully and effectively the job demands. The researchers also exposed evidence that employers think that graduates have unrealistic expectations about the workplace, and they generally do not have proper interpersonal skills. The study proposed cooperation in developing education programs to assist graduates in understanding the workplace. Similar research was undertaken by Andrews

and Higson (2008) who studied employer views about business graduates' employability in various countries and reported similarities among employer perspectives of what is called 'core components' of business graduates' employability such as the importance of soft business-related skills, the value of hard business-related knowledge, skills, and competencies and the necessity of previous work experience. On the other hand, Weligamage (2009) noticed that employer's expectations and requirements differ from one country to another. The study voiced that employees' skills and employers' needs should be considered when determining the required future skills. The study encouraged universities to recognize the set of skills demanded by the future labor market and align their academic programs with them. In a related line of research, Branine (2008) studied the change in the graduate selection and recruitment methods employed by UK employers and observed that, regardless of the organization size or activity type, employers tend to use more advanced and cost-effective methods of selection and recruitment methods than before. The study offered indication to support that the recruitment and selection process of graduates is becoming more related to the person than job-oriented. Since many employers are becoming more interested in personality, transferable skills, and applicant attitudes than the level of the type of required qualification. Robinson and Garton (2008) utilized the Borich (1980) assessment model to detect skills most in demand to promote college curriculum. The study pointed to solving problems, effective communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and possessing interactive skills as being the most important employability skills anticipated by employers. The study proposed that a faculty should organize workshops/training programs to help other faculty members in utilizing strategies to avoid deficiencies in their course's learning outcomes. Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) demonstrated that employers anticipate graduates starting a profession to acquire analytical/problem-solving skills, a level of business awareness or real-life experience, and basic accounting skills. The study disclosed that employers look for oral and written communication skills, professional skills, ethical awareness, teamwork, and an understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of business. The study further noticed that employers highly valued oral communication and believe that accounting educators need to adapt an accounting curriculum that incorporates work-integrated learning into accounting programs. Singh and Singh (2008) explored employers' views about employability skills demanded by the marketplace. The researchers noticed that employers prefer to hire graduates of state universities. They sensed that employers value graduates who have good communication skills and possess good information communication technology (ICT) more favorably than others. They further noticed that young employers have favorable views of graduates' employability skills.

Navehebrahim (2009) studied higher education quality through university graduates and observed a high level of satisfaction with the curriculum and relative satisfaction with the educational experience. The study suggests modifications in the curriculum that accommodate employers' advice and include more practical orientation to satisfy student needs. Rasul and Puvanasvaran (2009) solicited the views of employers in the manufacturing industry and pointed to basic skills, thinking skills, sources skills, resources skills, system and technology skills, and personal qualities as being the most important. Likewise, Zaharim et al. (2010) came up with the idea that knowledge, personal attributes, and personal skills, are important to employers. Alston et al. (2009) investigated employers' perceptions about preparation for entry-level positions of college graduates and noticed that they were prepared in the areas of communication, decision-making, management skills interpersonal, problem-solving, technology, and technical competence.

O'Regan (2010) stresses that universities adopt employability strategies to confront skills deficiency and develop good connections between universities, employers, and businesses. However, young people tackle their careers and the marketplace in different ways. O'Regan (2010) contended that the success of graduates is not only measured by their destination. It's also affected by the extent to which they can compete in the marketplace. Saunders and Zuzel (2010) demonstrated that employers pay attention to various personal traits and core skills more than subject-specific and technical skills. They claim that employers' appreciation of technical competence is not as high as their appreciation of specific individual skills. McCabe (2010) Believes that a graduate job is secured only when their traits and possessed skills are used successfully in the job. However, it is difficult to pinpoint the business school graduates' exact traits and skills demanded by employers since they are very likely to be governed by the makeup of the job. For example, the traits and skills of a business school graduate applying for a bank job are not like an applicant for a human resources or investment job.

Blom and Saeki (2011) investigated new graduates' set of skills necessary for employability and reported that employers recruiting new graduates are to some extent happy with their quality. They believe that employers consider soft skills like core employability and communication to be very important. They called on education institutions to advance graduates' skills, acknowledge the importance of soft skills, and interrelate more with employers to comprehend the need for skills. DuPre and Williams (2011) surveyed undergraduates' views about employer anticipation of employees and observed that employers favor relevant work experience. They believe that putting students in the related field work experience should be set highly in the institutional goal.

Ismail et al. (2011) made a comparison between graduates from different institutions and noticed that graduates of specific institutions possess specific characteristics. For example, while a university graduate has leadership characteristics, another university graduate would have good language proficiency; communication and interpersonal skills; problem-solving skills; decision-making; and team player. Lowden et al. (2011) referred to some skills and traits demanded by employers including managerial abilities, leadership, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork. Naidoo et al. (2011) tested a sample of graduates and noticed that they did not acquire high levels of skills like oral team skills and communication and offered evidence to prove that an expectation-performance gap exists despite efforts to identify the attributes required of accounting graduates. Raza and Naqvi (2011) solicited employers' views about the university graduates' quality in terms of their development skills including personal, professional, intellectual, and social. They realized that employers are not fully convinced that university graduates acquire good quality in any areas of development skills. They also noticed strong personal development skills, whereas social development skills appeared to be at the lowest count. Anho (2011) compared the perception of public and private sector employers about university graduates' employability. The researcher reported significant differences in the perception and rating of the quality and employability of graduates between the two sectors. He observed that while the public sector employers rated the graduates as low quality, the private sector employers think that university graduates are of high quality. The researcher suggested a review of the curriculum to meet the demands of different sectors of the economy.

Singh and Choo (2012) demonstrated that the manufacturing industry employers found the English language proficiency skills of the graduates to be below expectations. The researchers stressed the importance of English language proficiency together with the marketplace demands and globalization. Ting and Ying (2012) believe that academicians and practitioners maintain similar perceptions about the importance of business graduates' competencies such as oral skills, written skills, research skills, computer skills, teamwork ability, knowledge-acquiring skills, honesty, diligence, resourcefulness, and value-improving, innovative skills. Imeokparia and Kennedy (2012) noticed that business graduates' thinking skills are not as high as those of personal qualities. The researchers concluded that the current level of skills acquired by business graduates is satisfactory to guarantee the graduates' placements in the marketplace.

Padmini (2012) found soft skills to be the most critical skills for technical and management graduates. The researcher observed that a lack of communication skills is obvious. MdSaad et al. (2013) noticed that presentation skills, problem-solving, and tool-handling competency are among the graduates' skills highly required by employers. The researchers added that an employee, who solves problems, acts logically, evaluates situations to make decisions, and possesses the ability to think critically is an asset to the organization. Rasul et al. (2013) pointed out that employers emphasize personal qualities, thinking skills, and interpersonal skills that graduates need to acquire to get a job. The researchers added, that employers expect some type of teamwork in every position and any size of the industry.

Klibi and Oussii (2013) studied students' views about skills that might get them closer to employers' expectations. They predicted that employers would demand generic skills development related to communication, critical analysis, teamwork, and ethical awareness. The study reported that employers expect graduates to be ready for the job and this would result in gaps between students' perceptions and employers' expectations. The study urged universities to develop coherent frameworks and policies to promote social, vocational, cognitive intelligence, and personal development.

Balaceanu et al. (2013) studied the extent of employers' satisfaction with graduates' professional skills. The surveyed employers indicated that employees know sufficient to the company's demand. They, however, found graduates' lack of practical experience to be the main weakness. Employers recommended altering the curricula by making partnerships with the business environment and introducing a reasonable number of practical training hours to prepare the grounds for the graduates. McMurray et al. (2016) explored the main factors employers look for when recruiting business school first-degree graduates and found the most important ones are relevant work experience, personal attitude, and degree results. Employers also expressed that they prefer, when recruiting business school first-degree graduates, to possess transferable skills such as motivation, willingness to learn, communication, trustworthiness, and reliability.

In a different line of research, Qureshi et al. (2016) studied the relationship between staff perceptions of employability and graduates and reported no differences. The researchers, however, noticed that students' attitudes, over time, became less positive. Amani (2017) investigated employment barriers facing graduates and pointed to poor communication skills, job-skill mismatch, lack of confidence, the choice of field of study, ineffective career guidance, an ineffective labor market information system (LMIS), and gaps in the employment policy. The

researcher argues that tackling these barriers requires educating prospective graduates about different occupation options during career guidance. The researcher proposed a review of university training curricula to include key generic skills like entrepreneurship and communication.

Chen (2017) suggests social networks as an important factor that ensures a graduate's employability. Nazron et al. (2017) reported an insignificant relationship between graduates' knowledge and employability, technical skills, communication skills, ICT skills, problem-solving, teamwork, ethics, leadership, and professionalism. Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) studied the effect of academic performance and taking part in extracurricular activities on business graduates' employability. The study found that high academic performance with participation in extracurricular activities promotes employability; modest academic performance coupled with taking part in extracurricular activities results in lower job suitability. Similarly, Helena and Kena (2019) examined the effect of academic performance and participation in extracurricular activities on the perceived employability of business graduates and found a positive relationship between them.

Soon et al. (2019) also examined the relationship between employability and graduates' academic performance. The study concluded that academic performance is not a major determinant of graduates' employability. Neneh (2019) tested whether personal characteristics are strong determinants of graduates' self-perceived employability. The findings revealed that openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness positively and significantly affect employability. Hossain et al. (2020) tested the relationship between employability and the skills of business graduates. The researchers reported a positive association between employability soft skills and technical skills. They further reported that employability is significantly affected by social mobility.

Jayasingha et al. (2020) investigated factors affecting graduate employability and found soft skills, English proficiency, gender, professional qualification, experience, and training to have a significant effect. They, however, found that information technology skills have an insignificant impact on graduate employability. Succi and Canovi (2020) examined and compared employers' and students' views about the importance of soft skills in several European countries and reported major differences between them in ranking soft skills, indicating different levels of priorities. Hossain et al. (2021) investigated factors that affect the employability of private university graduates. The researchers found positive and significant associations between graduates' employability and their personality, communication, academic performance, problem-solving, and teamwork. They also showed that graduates' employability is positively but insignificantly influenced by factors such as motivation, technical skills, and leadership.

Mgaiwa (2021) studied the best practices to tackle unemployment among university graduates and proposed practices such as adopting regular university curriculum reviews, strengthening quality assurance systems, building effective industry-university partnerships, and aligning university education programs with the country's development plans. Omarkhanovas et al. (2022) looked for the factors that determine graduates' employability and emphasized the need for university graduates to be competitive in the marketplace. Jiang et al. (2023) studied the factors that affect college graduates' employability improvement and found employability is

significantly affected by workplace training, individual traits, and social experience. They also found employability is affected by generic skills, knowledge, self-management ability, understanding and learning ability, emotional intelligence, career planning capability, and professional ability. Kassa (2023) surveyed factors affecting business graduates' employability and pointed to self-efficacy, level of graduates' competency, and university reputation. Segbenya et al. (2023) studied demographic characteristics' effect on graduates' perceptions of employability skills. The researchers reported employers' three most important employability skills: the application of computer and technical skills, processing, and interpreting numerical data, and the ability to work under pressure with less supervision.

On the other hand, in the GCC region, few studies have been undertaken to identify the important factors that business graduates must acquire to meet employers' demands. ElSakran and Awad (2012) studied skills demanded by UAE engineering companies' employers from recruits and found deficiencies in the graduates' oral and written communication skills and some other personal attributes. The researcher encouraged engineering colleges in non-English speaking countries to emphasize English fluency as a necessary condition for success in the international marketplace.

Al-Mutairi *et al.* (2014a) explored factors demanded by employers when recruiting business graduates in Kuwait and found that employers attached the highest level of importance to soft skills, knowledge, and the ability to work within groups. They also observed that employers' background characteristics, the firm's nature, size, and ownership affect the employability factors. In addition, Al-Mutairi *et al.* (2014b) assessed the importance that employers and academicians assign to factors that impact business graduates' employability in Kuwait. They found that employers assign high levels of importance to graduates' soft skills, knowledge, and personal abilities; while academicians do not assign the same levels of importance to these factors. They advised Business schools to develop their academic programs to meet the demands of the marketplace.

It is obvious from the literature review that there are several factors that employees look for when recruiting university graduates including hard skills, soft skills, personal characteristics, and graduates' capabilities. It is, therefore, hypothesized that:

- H₁:** Business graduate's employment is influenced by graduates' knowledge.
- H₂:** Business graduates' employment is influenced by graduates' hard skills.
- H₃:** Business graduates' employment is influenced by graduates' soft skills.
- H₄:** Business graduates' employment is influenced by graduates' ability to work within groups.
- H₅:** Employability decision is influenced by the employer's nationality
- H₆:** Employability decision is influenced by the employer's age
- H₇:** Employability decision is influenced by the employer's gender
- H₈:** Employability decision is influenced by the employer's academic qualification
- H₉:** Employability decision is influenced by the employer's place of last academic degree
- H₁₀:** Employability decision is influenced by the employer's years of work experience

Data Collection and Study Methodology

The study targeted employers in the Al Riyadh and Al Qusim regions. The choice of these two regions was based because they have the biggest economic districts in Saudi Arabia, and they host the headquarters of the country's most important companies. In addition, the majority of these two regions are Saudi nationals and the country's Vision 2030 attached great importance to the Riyadh region. 250 Questionnaires were distributed to employers in the two regions and 135 returned completed resulting in a 54 percent valid response rate.

The questionnaire was derived from Al-Mutairi (2014a, 2014b) due to similarities between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in terms of culture, education system, level of economic growth, and labor market requirements. The questionnaire divided the factors demanded by employers when recruiting business graduates into four main categories: knowledge, soft skills, personal abilities, and ability to work within a group. The respondents were requested to state the level of importance they attribute to graduates' knowledge, skills, and abilities and to work within groups on a 1- 5 Likert scale, where 1 indicates not important at all and 5 indicates very important. The internal consistency of the respondents' answers was assessed by performing Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability test and it appeared to be 0.952. This suggests high internal consistency among the respondents' answers. In social science research, 0.70 coefficient reliability is considered acceptable. Additionally, descriptive statistics are employed to detect the important factors that employers demand from business graduates. To explore whether employers' traits affect the importance they attach to employability factors acquired by business graduates, the Kruskal-Wallis coefficient was performed.

Findings

Respondent's features

The first section of the questionnaire requested personal information about the respondents including nationality, gender, age, academic qualifications, place of the last academic qualifications, and years of experience. Table 1 offers a summary of the participant's personal information.

	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Nationality			Gender		
Saudi	127	94.1	Male	84	62.2
Non-Saudi	8	5.9	Female	51	37.8
Total	135	100.0	Total	135	100.0
Age			Academic qualification		
25-35 years	77	57.0	Bachelor	93	68.9
36-50 Years	43	31.9	Masters	29	21.5
More than 50 years	15	11.1	PhD	13	9.6
Total	135	100.0	Total	135	100.0
Place of last academic degree			Work experience		
Saudi Arabia	105	77.8	Less than 3 years	56	41.5

An Arab Country	5	3.7		3- 10 years	26	19.3
UK	18	13.3		11- 15 years	13	9.6
USA	5	3.7		More than 15 years	40	29.6
Others	2	1.5		Total	135	100.0
Total	135	100.0				

Table 1: Respondents background

It can be deduced from the table that most of the respondents are Saudis (94.1%). This reflects the Saudi Authorities' policy of Saudization. The table also revealed that a large proportion of the respondents' age (57%) ranges between 25 and 35 years and most of them (77.8% (received their education in Saudi educational institutions. What attracts attention in the respondents' place of last academic institutions is that more than 13% of the respondents showed that they studied at British academic institutions.

Table (1) further disclosed that 62.2% of the respondents are males, whereas 37.8% of the respondents are females. This reflects the transformation that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed in recent years and the importance it gives to the role of women in sustainable economic development. Similarly, the table disclosed that a significant proportion of the respondents hold a bachelor's academic degree (68.9%). A sizable proportion of the respondents also showed that they hold high academic degrees (21.5% master's degree and 9.6% PhD). Finally, the table revealed that a large proportion of the respondents have more than 3 years of work experience (58.5%). Diversity in the participants' backgrounds is expected to strengthen the credibility of the results of this study.

Knowledge

The respondents were requested to state the level of importance they assign to various knowledge factors that appeared in previous research. The results of their answers analyses are summarized in table (2). It can be observed from Table 2 that the respondents attach high levels of importance to all knowledge factors listed in the questionnaire as replicated by the resulting means and medians. The highest level of importance was given to the ability of the graduate to understand the marketplace, self-quality control, and the ability to have added value. The relatively low standard deviation associated with these factors reflects that there is a consensus among respondents on the importance they attach to the factors listed in the questionnaire.

Personal Characteristics	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	Rank based on the mean
Familiarity with different aspects of the business	135	4.23	4.00	0.69	2.00	5.00	5
Enjoying a global awareness	135	4.20	4.00	0.81	2.00	5.00	6
The ability to comprehend things on his/ her own	135	4.30	4.00	0.79	2.00	5.00	4

The ability to understand the workplace	135	4.50	5.00	0.65	2.00	5.00	1
The ability to have an added value	135	4.38	4.00	0.69	2.00	5.00	3
Self-quality control ability	135	4.50	5.00	0.58	2.00	5.00	1
All	135	4.35	4.00	0.47	2.00	5.00	

Table 2: The level of importance assigned by employers to respondents' knowledge

Although the respondents recognized the importance of factors such as global awareness and familiarity with different aspects of the business as being important factors in recruiting business graduates, the level of importance was not as high as the other mentioned factors. In this respect, it's important to mention that most of the businesses in the Arab countries are often family projects and family members occupy the important positions. Families also prefer hiring relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Hence, different aspects of business knowledge and global awareness are not expected from non-family members. Employment in family businesses will be restricted to graduates who can understand the workplace and are expected to add value to the family members' efforts.

	Nationality		Age		Place of last academic degree		Gender		Academic Qualification		Work experience	
	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig
Familiarity with different aspects of business	0.68	0.41	16.76	0.00	7.00	0.14	0.06	0.81	2.39	0.30	7.71	0.05
Enjoying a global awareness	0.72	0.40	6.06	0.05	0.82	0.94	1.43	0.22	3.74	0.15	0.41	0.94
The ability to comprehend things on his/ her own	3.41	0.06	1.44	0.49	13.13	0.01	0.02	0.89	5.32	0.07	4.01	0.26
The ability to understand the workplace	0.05	0.83	3.97	0.14	9.00	0.06	0.24	0.62	1.39	0.50	1.92	0.59
The ability to improve the value	0.00	1.00	6.78	0.03	8.10	0.09	0.33	0.57	0.02	0.99	4.39	0.22
Self-quality control ability	0.68	0.41	16.76	0.00	7.00	0.14	0.06	0.81	2.39	0.30	7.71	0.05

Table 3: Knowledge factors- Kruskal Wallis test

To assess whether the respondents' traits influence the importance they attach to the business knowledge factors, the Kruskal Wallis test was performed and reported in Table 3. Table (3) highlights that while gender does not affect the importance that Saudi employers assign to knowledge factors, significant differences appeared between the age characteristics showing that it has in the importance they attach to various knowledge factors. A significant difference also appeared between "*the ability to comprehend things on his/ her own*" and nationality. The age characteristic of the respondents showed significant differences in the importance Saudi employers attach to most of the knowledge factors listed in the questionnaire.

In addition, the place from which the respondents attained their last academic degree also pointed to some significant differences in the importance they attach to factors such as "*the ability to comprehend things on his/ her own and the ability to understand the workplace*". Furthermore, the work experience of the respondents showed significant differences in the importance they attach to "*familiarity with different aspects of the business and self-quality control ability*". However, one significant difference is the importance the respondents attach to "*the ability to comprehend things on his/ her own*" due to their academic qualifications.

The significant difference in the importance of the ability to comprehend things on his/their own due to nationality may reflect the general perception of employers in the GCC countries in general that national graduates do not take their work seriously and are not prepared to comprehend things on their own. The significant differences among the respondents due to their age about most of the knowledge factors included in the questionnaire may be because employers at an early stage of their life look at limited knowledge characteristics acquired by the graduate.

At this early stage employers' experience, knowledge, and share in the market are limited. As employers get older and expand their businesses, they will look for more knowledge factors acquired by graduates. In other words, as employers get older, their projects expand and grow, their market share increases, and the importance they assign to various knowledge factors they expect from graduates is likely to change.

Hard skills

A list of hard skills that appeared in the previous research and were viewed by employers as being important factors when recruiting university graduates were listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were requested to state the level of importance, they assign to each of them. An analysis of their response is given in Table 4.

	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	Rank based on the mean
All	135	4.28	4.00	0.54	2.00	5.00	
Computing skills	135	4.49	5.00	0.63	2.00	5.00	1
Learning Skills	135	4.43	5.00	0.69	2.00	5.00	2
Oral communication skills	135	4.41	5.00	0.71	2.00	5.00	3
Digital skills	135	4.28	4.00	0.72	2.00	5.00	4
Presentation skills	135	4.25	4.00	0.74	2.00	5.00	5
Written communication skills	135	4.24	4.00	0.68	2.00	5.00	6
Analysis skills	135	4.18	4.00	0.85	2.00	5.00	7
Research skills	135	4.16	4.00	0.82	2.00	5.00	8
Evaluation skills	135	4.07	4.00	0.79	2.00	5.00	9

Table 4: The level of importance assigned by employers to respondents' hard skills

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The table reveals that the respondents assign relatively high importance to all hard skills factors included in the questionnaire as mirrored by the resulting means. However, the respondents assign the highest levels of importance to factors such as computing skills, learning skills, and oral communication skills. The respondents, however, attach less importance to factors such as evaluation and research skills. The result is not surprising since most jobs nowadays require computing and communication skills. The importance of acquiring computing skills and information skills emerged during the spread of the Corona pandemic. To assess whether respondents' traits affect the importance they assign to soft skills acquired by business school graduates, the Kruskal Wallis test was undertaken and the results are presented in Table 5.

	Nationality		Age		Place of last academic degree		Gender		Academic Qualification		Work experience	
	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig
Oral communication skills	0.00	1.00	6.78	0.03	8.10	0.09	0.33	0.57	0.00	0.96	2.61	0.27
Written communication skills	0.30	0.58	1.53	0.47	5.90	0.21	2.20	0.14	1.53	0.22	1.50	0.47
Presentation skills	1.08	0.30	6.77	0.03	9.78	0.04	7.95	0.01	3.46	0.06	2.66	0.26
Research skills	1.17	0.28	10.87	0.00	7.26	0.12	1.60	0.21	3.88	0.05	1.54	0.46
Digital skills	0.15	0.70	3.18	0.20	5.51	0.24	1.18	0.28	1.14	0.29	1.32	0.52
Computing skills	1.25	0.26	3.87	0.15	4.06	0.40	2.03	0.15	2.57	0.11	2.01	0.37
Evaluation skills	0.04	0.84	1.92	0.38	10.01	0.04	5.56	0.02	2.99	0.08	6.52	0.04
Learning Skills	0.28	0.60	1.82	0.40	11.86	0.02	2.51	0.11	1.33	0.25	1.18	0.55
Analysis skills	0.14	0.71	0.21	0.90	5.22	0.27	1.96	0.16	0.85	0.36	1.41	0.49

Table 5: Kruskal Wallis test of respondents' traits affect the importance they assign to soft skills

The table disclosed consensus among the respondents about the level of importance they assign to all soft skills included in the questionnaire. However, few significant differences among the participants appeared in the table. Differences appeared around the level of importance assigned to presentation skills and research skills due to the respondents' age and academic qualifications. In addition, differences appeared about the level of importance assigned to evaluation skills due to the respondents' gender and work experience. Significant differences in the importance attached to oral communication and learning skills due to the place where the respondents received their last academic qualifications.

Significant differences among participants due to their age about the importance of presentation skills and research skills can be explained because not all businesses require these skills at all stages. It is possible that at an early stage, employers attach high levels of importance to research and presentation skills to conduct market research and advertising campaigns that require presentation skills. Once the business establishes itself in the market and builds its image, research and presentation skills become less important. Significant differences in the importance attached to oral communication skills and learning skills due to the place from where the respondents attained their last academic qualifications can be explained because a sizable number of the respondents revealed that they studied in the UK and the USA.

These employers anticipate that business school graduates to acquire oral communication skills and learning skills. Needless to say, English is the business language. The only significant

difference reported between respondents' gender and evaluation skills might be due to the nature of the businesses owned by women in Saudi Arabia. The significant differences in the importance attached to presentation skills and research skills due to academic qualifications can be explained because respondents who hold Masters and PhDs are expected to put more emphasis on these skills than employers with lower academic degrees. Soft skills Several graduates' attributes frequently mentioned in previous research have been listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were requested to state the level of importance they assign to each of them. Analysis of their answers is condensed in Table 6.

	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	Rank based on the mean
Self-reliance	135	4.57	5	0.58	2	5	3
Honesty	135	4.8	5	0.5	2	5	1
Diligence	135	4.66	5	0.55	2	5	2
Risk assessment	135	4.24	4	0.74	2	5	11
Risk Management	135	4.29	4	0.67	2	5	10
Time management	135	4.5	5	0.58	2	5	5
Making decisions	135	4.34	4	0.71	2	5	7
Career planning	135	4.14	4	0.75	2	5	12
Taking initiative	135	4.27	4	0.81	2	5	9
Flexibility	135	4.39	5	0.77	2	5	6
Energetic	135	4.3	4	0.73	2	5	8
Passionate	135	3.74	4	0.95	2	5	13
Self-confidence	135	4.51	5	0.71	2	5	4
All	135	4.37	4	0.48	2	5	

Table 6: The level of importance assigned by employers to respondents' soft skills

Table (6) demonstrated that the respondents attached high levels of importance to all personal attributes included in the questionnaire except passion. This reality has been embodied in the resulting means and medians. While personal attributes like honesty, diligence, self-reliance, and confidence appeared to receive the respondents' highest level of importance, attributes such as passion, career planning, risk assessment, and risk management were assigned the lowest levels of importance. The results of the analysis confirm the work nature in Saudi Arabia, in which the employer depends on the employees to do everything, and this requires self-confidence, self-reliance, and diligence. Employers are also interested in the result without paying too much attention to passion. They further consider career planning an employee issue that does not concern them. Risk measurement and risk management are often undertaken by the employers themselves because, first and foremost, it will affect them. To identify whether respondents' traits affect the level of importance they assign to graduates' soft skills, the Kruskal Wallis test was performed and reported in Table 7. The table showed consensus on the level of importance the respondents attached to listed factors regardless of their nationality and academic qualifications. The table pointed to major differences in the respondents' level of importance assigned to self-

reliance and honesty due to their age, place from where the last academic degree was attained, and gender. Given the highest mean for these three skills, the apparent significant difference is mainly due to those attached highly important and important.

	Nationality		Age		Place of last academic degree		Gender		Academic Qualification		Work experience	
	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig
Self-reliance	0.14	0.71	7.57	0.02	9.45	0.05	4.1	0.04	2.39	0.12	3.39	0.18
Honesty	0.63	0.43	5.72	0.06	8.94	0.06	3.45	0.06	1.23	0.27	2.21	0.33
Diligence	0.01	0.91	2.52	0.28	6.47	0.17	0.24	0.62	0.3	0.59	1.15	0.56
Risk assessment	0.04	0.84	1.69	0.43	12.85	0.01	0.06	0.81	2.51	0.11	1.94	0.38
Risk Management	0.03	0.86	4.36	0.11	10.67	0.03	0.05	0.83	0.04	0.85	0.1	0.95
Time management	0.72	0.4	4.49	0.11	4.08	0.4	0.27	0.6	0.01	0.93	5.48	0.07
Making decisions	0.67	0.41	1.25	0.54	3.98	0.41	0	0.99	0.06	0.81	0.46	0.8
Career planning	1.56	0.21	5.07	0.08	9.24	0.06	0.08	0.78	0	1	7.23	0.03
Taking initiative	0.02	0.89	1.64	0.44	6.41	0.17	0.91	0.34	1.69	0.19	2.95	0.23
Flexibility	1.16	0.28	0.94	0.62	4.67	0.32	0.48	0.49	0.11	0.74	1.59	0.45
Energetic	2.05	0.15	4.74	0.09	5.4	0.25	0.35	0.55	1.33	0.25	2.11	0.35
Passionate	0.11	0.74	8.61	0.01	9.27	0.06	0.03	0.86	0.11	0.75	3.28	0.19
Self-confidence	0.72	0.4	2.09	0.35	11.73	0.02	0.05	0.83	0.57	0.45	6.23	0.04

Table 7: Soft skills- Kruskal Wallis test

The table further showed that several significant levels of differences appeared due to the respondents' place from where they received their last academic degree. Significant differences due to the place of the last academic qualifications are justified because employers with Western academic qualifications are more likely to be affected by the content of the academic programs together with the way businesses are run there.

Working within groups

The respondents were requested to specify the importance they attach to graduates' ability to work within groups. An analysis of their response is provided in Table 8.

	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	Rank based on the mean
Adaptation	135	4.45	5.00	0.64	2.00	5.00	3
Leadership skills	135	4.21	4.00	0.77	2.00	5.00	5
Teamwork	135	4.58	5.00	0.59	2.00	5.00	2
Work with diversity	135	4.35	4.00	0.72	2.00	5.00	4
Work ethics	135	4.71	5.00	0.58	2.00	5.00	1
All	135	4.46	5.00	0.48	2.20	5.00	

Table 8: The level of importance assigned by employers to respondents' work within groups

It is obvious from the table that the respondents assign high levels of importance to all factors that promote graduates to work within groups as mirrored by the resulting means and the medians. While the respondents assigned the highest level of importance to work ethics and teamwork, they assigned the lowest level of importance to leadership skills and work within diversity. Once again, the result reflects the culture of the Saudi society that adopts Islamic Shariah principles in conducting their business activities.

To identify variations in the importance that the respondents assign to a graduate's work within a group, the Kruskal Wallis test was performed and the result is presented in Table 9.

	Nationality		Age		Place of last academic degree		Gender		Academic Qualification		Work experience	
	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig
Adaptation	0.12	0.73	2.11	0.35	10.61	0.03	0.07	0.79	1.73	0.42	4.78	0.09
Leadership skills	0.01	0.94	0.42	0.81	14.46	0.01	0.30	0.59	0.28	0.87	2.77	0.25
Teamwork	0.29	0.59	5.85	0.05	9.37	0.05	0.17	0.68	2.41	0.30	8.70	0.01
Work with diversity	0.41	0.52	8.42	0.02	7.70	0.10	0.18	0.67	1.53	0.47	6.01	0.05
Work ethics	0.04	0.84	7.38	0.03	11.67	0.02	0.49	0.48	2.47	0.29	0.11	0.95

Table 9: Working within groups: Kruskal Wallis`

The table showed a high level of agreement among the respondents on the importance they assign to the working within groups factors regardless of their nationality, gender, and academic qualification. Significant differences appeared due to the respondents' age, place of last academic qualification, and work experience. Since the resulting means and medians are relatively high, the difference is mainly between those who assign high importance and importance. Knowledge, hard skills, soft skills, and working within groups. To test the study's hypotheses, various factors that affect the importance that Saudi employers attach to various factors of employability included in the questionnaire, sub-factors that formed each category were combined into four main factors (knowledge, hard skills, soft skills, and working within groups). Descriptive statistics together with the Kruskal Wallis tests were performed and reported in Tables 10 and 11.

	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum	Rank
Knowledge	4.35	4.00	0.47	2.00	5.00	3
Hard skills	4.28	4.00	0.54	2.00	5.00	4
Soft Skills	4.37	4.00	0.48	2.00	5.00	2
Working within groups	4.46	5.00	0.48	2.00	5.00	1

Table 10: All factors affecting business graduates' employability

Table 10 disclosed that Saudi employers attach the highest degree of importance to the ability of business graduates to work within groups and the soft skills that they possess. Kruskal Wallis test summarized in Table 11 pointed to differences in the importance that the respondents attach to various factors of business graduates' employability due to their age and the place of the

	Nationality		Age		Place of last academic degree		Gender		Academic Qualification		Work experience	
	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig	χ^2	Sig
Knowledge	0.46	0.50	11.80	0.00	8.37	0.08	0.18	0.67	1.01	0.32	0.54	0.76
Hard skills	0.03	0.87	7.51	0.02	12.24	0.02	4.55	0.03	3.11	0.08	2.94	0.23
Soft Skills	0.09	0.77	7.54	0.02	7.58	0.11	0.18	0.68	0.13	0.72	3.68	0.16
Working within groups	0.65	0.42	7.06	0.03	11.85	0.02	0.00	0.98	0.44	0.51	8.16	0.02

Table 11: All factors affecting business graduates' employability: Kruskal Wallis

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to identify factors affecting employers' decision to recruit business graduates in Saudi Arabia. To attain this objective a questionnaire was developed and included five sections. The first section asked for general background information about the respondents: their nationality, age, gender, place from which they obtained their last academic qualification, academic qualifications, and years of work experience. The second, third, fourth, and fifth sections, asked the respondents to specify the importance they attach to the business graduate's knowledge, hard skills, soft skills, and working within groups respectively. 250 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to Saudi employers in the areas of Al Qassim and Al Riyadh and 135 returned: resulting in a 54% usable response rate.

The questionnaire analyses disclosed that the surveyed Saudi employers attach a relatively high level of importance to almost all factors included in the questionnaire. However, the highest level of importance was given to the ability of graduates to work within groups and the acquired soft skills. In particular, the respondents attached the highest importance to factors such as honesty, work ethics, the ability to understand the workplace, self-quality control ability, computing skills, diligence, teamwork, self-reliance, and time management. The results of the questionnaire analyses also disclosed that the surveyed Saudi employers assigned importance to various factors of business graduates' employability is influenced by their age, place of last academic qualifications, and years of work experience.

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