

## QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF QUALITY INDICATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the correlation between quality indicators of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan, which is based on the views of graduates, faculty, and employers. Using a qualitative research design, the study aims to clarify the themes that express the quality of education through the perspective of the stakeholders directly engaged in the system of the higher education. In order to cover a wide range of perspectives on the factors that affect the result of employability, some graduates, faculty members, and employers, who represented different fields of professional activities, were interviewed through the semi-structured approach. The results have shown that institutional support, curriculum relevance, and quality of teaching are found to be major factors of employability. However, there has been a great mismatch between university education and the industrial needs that still creates a gap between skills. Employers also indicate that there are no viable training courses in the university system which handicaps the graduate to the job market. These findings indicate that in as much as institutions in Punjab strive to improve quality, more needs to be done to ensure that employability skills are incorporated into the study curriculum and pedagogy. The study adds to the academic discourse as it offers a comprehensive qualitative study of the problem of quality in higher education in Punjab and its further consequences on employability. Its implications are also especially relevant to policymakers, academic institutions, and employers who want to enhance the employability of graduates.

### INTRODUCTION

The connections between the quality of higher education and graduate employability are the main focus of the educational policy discussion in Pakistan and especially in Punjab. The province faces unique challenges in nurturing graduates who will satisfy the need of a developing labour market given that it has a large percentage of tertiary institutions in the nation. The Higher Education Commission

(HEC) has over the past years implemented a reform program that aims at improving the quality of education. Nonetheless, disparities between the skills gained by learners and those required by the job market also keep increasing. It is a paper that discusses the quality indicators that inform the educational experience of the graduates and impact on their future job

prospects in Punjab in the context of current higher-education reforms.

The employment ability factor is heightened by the fact the Pakistani labour market has a growing number of youth with increasing population. Although the number of people enrolling in higher education has been on the rise, the graduates are turning out to face serious challenges in getting meaningful jobs especially because of the lack of skill integration between the skills taught in the university and those required in the market. This is a weakness that is eminent in Punjab which has majority of the universities. They regularly are complaining by employers that the graduates, particularly those of the public institutions, do not possess hands-on skills or soft skills as well as experience that would enable them to succeed in the labour-market. This study seeks to establish the key quality indicators in higher education which define employability as understood by the graduates, faculty and employers.

The HEC has set a range of quality-assurance standards of higher education in Punjab. However, it is common to find that in most institutions these standards are not fully adhered to with some of them not paying attention to accreditation requirements. Despite the efforts of improving teaching and curriculum development, many institutions are struggling with old programmes, lack of industry connections, and resources to support career-development. Graduates are, therefore, in most cases not ready to become part of the workforce. The main factors driving this gap are discussed in this paper, and the impact of the current quality measures on the graduate employability in Punjab is evaluated.

The situation and the intricacy of the matter explain the need to adopt a qualitative research design. Although quantitative research provides data that can be generalised and applied to the entire population on employability rates and academic performances, the research is not normally detailed on the factors that explain the phenomenon. A qualitative design will also allow a deeper examination of the perceptions, attitudes, and experience of the main stakeholders, including graduates, faculty, and employers, whose opinions cannot be ignored to find out the details that connect the quality of education with employability. The study

presents a vivid, descriptive view of the role of quality indicators in graduate employability through the lens of semi-structured interviews that allow recording the responses of people who are directly involved in the education and employment process.

The work is useful to the scholarly community as it provides a detailed qualitative research on the conditions that affect graduate employability in the higher-education system of Punjab. It also provides practical recommendations to policymakers, learning institutions and employers who need to improve graduate employability. In addition to this, the findings will be relevant in future policy changes and policies to synchronize higher-education outputs with labour-markets in Pakistan.

### **Problem Statement**

Over the past few years, the rate of expansion of institutions of higher learning in Punjab has failed to be accompanied by corresponding expansive growth in graduate employability. Even though the quantity of universities and degree programmes in the country has seen a tremendous increase, the graduates are still experiencing severe problems in finding meaningful employment opportunities often blaming their predicaments on the fact that they have not been taught the right skill at the appropriate place and at the right time. Some of the factors that result in low employability are the quality of teaching, relevance of curriculum and lack of institutional support to career development. In addition, even though the HEC and provincial governments have been trying to homogenize and enhance the quality of education, a significant number of institutions do not meet the accreditation and quality-assurance standards, which creates a heterogeneous educational standard.

Though the HEC has introduced the quality-assurance measures to solve these problems there is insignificant information on the effectiveness of these measures at institutions especially in Punjab. The available empirical research is mainly limited to quantitative studies on employability rates and graduate outcomes, thus there is a lack of qualitative research that investigates the lived experiences and perceptions of the primary stakeholders of the research graduates, faculty, and employers. This

qualitative enquiry is critical towards having a holistic perspective on barriers and obstacles of graduate employability in the region.

This research paper aims to address the gap in knowledge by exploring the perception of graduates, faculty, and employers regarding higher-education quality indicators and their role in influencing the outcomes of employability. In the case of Punjab, the study will seek to understand the factors that help enable employability in greater detail by utilizing the qualitative methodology and suggest how universities can better equip themselves to match labour-market requirements.

The current study will address two concerns that are connected with each other, namely the discrepancy between the quality indicators used in higher learning institutions and the level of skills required by employers; second, the lack of qualitative research on the subject. The study makes efforts to explain the effect of quality of education on employability in Punjab, Pakistan through its elaborate stakeholder discourse.

## Research Objectives

The general aim of this study is to discuss the association between quality indicators of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan. The research will also aim at analysing the perceptions and experiences of the major stakeholders namely graduates, faculty members and employers to explain the qualitative themes, which characterize the relationship between education quality and graduate readiness to workforce.

**First**, the study will examine the perceptions of graduates, faculty, and employers of quality indicators in higher education and the impacts of the indicators on the employability. The unique contributions of these groups to educational experience and employability outcome will be compared to identify the contradictions between the expectations of the employer, the needs of curricular development identified by the faculty, and the self-reported readiness of graduates. The findings will produce practical implications to the tertiary institutions who want to make their practices relevant to the expectations of the labour-markets.

**Secondly**, institutional practices including curriculum design, teaching methods, and career support services will be analysed by the research to evaluate their effects on graduate employability in Punjab. Although recent universities have been active in inspiring curricula and pedagogies, there have been no apparent gains in the level of employability. Through the institutional practices, the research will determine the effectiveness of the existing teaching practices and how well the universities prepare students to be market-oriented. It shall also investigate how the systems of institutional support such as career counselling, internship opportunities and industry partnerships can be used to enhance employability.

The **third** goal aims to find the qualitative themes that can be used to bind the teaching quality, curriculum relevance and institutional support to the outcomes of employability. Instructional design variables, curricular relevance variables and the level of institutional support variables are critical determinants of graduate readiness. Exploring their interdependence will help shed light on the overall effect of these factors on employability and allow building a holistic image of the influence of educational practices in the Punjab higher-educational system.

**Forth**, the research will explore the challenges that higher learning institutions encounter in developing graduate employability. Even though there has been an increase in awareness of employability, several institutions are not capable of preparing students to fit into the labour market because of the obsolete curricula, poor industry relations, lack of career preparation, and insufficient focus on soft skills. It will help to address these barriers, which will inform specific strategies to reduce institutional, structural, and cultural barriers, which will reduce the difference between the level of higher education and higher employability performance, and will give specific recommendations on how to address them.

## Research Questions

The paper is organized based on a set of research questions that attempt to explore the correlation between the signs of the quality of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab,

Pakistan. The questions will examine the perception of the key stakeholders, namely graduates, faculty, and employers, and will be used to determine the factors that determine the outcomes of employability.

1. What are stakeholders (graduates, faculty, and employers) perceptions of higher education quality indicators in Punjab?

This question aims to identify the perception of graduates, faculty, and employers regarding the key indicators of the quality of higher-education. It will seek to establish what each group views to be critical in determining the quality of education which includes teaching competence, relevance of curriculum, institutional support and what is expected by industries.

2. How in turn do these quality indicators affect graduate employability?

The question is to investigate the impact of certain quality indicators of higher education on graduate employability. It examines the relationship between quality of teaching, relevance of curricula and support by institutions in developing skills and competencies that match labor-market needs and consequently improve employability.

3. Which institutional practices are favourable or unfavourable to employability?

The question that aims to support this is to determine which practice by colleges helps or hinders employability by graduates. It will be based on curricular design, pedagogical approaches, career-counselling services, internship programmes, and the industrial associations and assessed its role in graduate employability.

4. Which are the difficulties that graduates and employers find in the post-university workforce?

This question will reveal the challenges faced by graduates between the university education and employment along with the challenges that employers face in employing the graduates. It will discuss the mismatch between academic training and industry expectations as well as other barriers that influence the job market employability of graduates.

### **Significance of the Study**

The paper has significant applicability to a wide range of stakeholders in the system of higher-education in Pakistan, such as policymakers,

higher-education institutions, employers, curriculum designers and academic researchers. The results will be applied to the ongoing debate about improving the quality of higher education to meet graduate employability, which is an urgent issue of national and provincial education policies.

The study will provide more insight into how educational outputs and labor-market requirements in Punjab, Pakistan are not aligned because it will explore the experiences and perceptions of graduates, faculty, and employers. To the policy makers, the inferences will be used to make policies related to education reform and policy formulations that will be used to improve graduate employability. The results will assist in identifying the areas in which the government efforts, including those focused on the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the provincial education departments, could be enhanced to enhance the quality of education and make it more industry-oriented. Knowledge on how education quality affects employability will empower the policymakers in making more focused interventions that respond to both systemic and institutional constraints.

The institutions of higher education will have a better insight into the factors that contribute to graduate employability. This study will shed light on the issues of curriculum design, quality of teaching, institutional support services, and career counselling as determinants of preparing students to work in the workforce. Such knowledge will enable universities to take evidence-based choices, which can advance their education and bridge the divide between higher education and employment. Institutions can also use the study to enhance industry partnerships and come up with more efficient career-development programmes that can help students easily move out of school into the job market.

Employers will also have an idea of how universities can be more useful in equipping graduates with skills and competencies required in the job market. Through their ability to identify educational shortfalls as the employer sees them, businesses are better able to negotiate with the universities on how to construct the curriculum to be more industry-focused so that not only would the persons be academically

qualified, but they would also be able to work in the modern competitive world and be practically prepared to work in the job market.

The study will also be of interest to curriculum designers and academic researchers who aim at improving the quality of higher-education. The study will offer evidence-based recommendations on curriculum development that focus on both the academic and practical employability skills by defining the crucial quality indicators and their influence on employability. The results will be deployed to the academic literature on quality and employability in higher-education to provide a holistic qualitative outlook that would guide future studies.

On the whole, the importance of the study is that it may provide some practical data that can be used to change the policy, institutional practices, and curriculum. The research will help add to the current endeavor to enhance the fit of higher-education provision and labor-market requirements in Punjab, Pakistan by analyzing the qualitative factors that determine employability.

### Literature Review

The quality/ graduate employability nexus in higher education has remained a topic of great debate across the world with more focus being given to the need to ensure that universities not only graduate academically competent graduates but also those who are better suited to compete in the labor market. Most education systems around the world are under increasing pressure to ensure that their respective curricula keep pace with the changing job market (Harvey, 2000). According to Teichler (2009), institutions of higher-learnings need to address the demands in the labor market through providing those programmes which enable both acquisition of academic knowledge and skills. This is not the case in developing nations like Pakistan, though, where the educational-employability gap remains to be present, due to the obsolete curricula and little possibilities to give the students practical experience (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010). This is especially noticeable in Punjab, as even with the growth in university enrolments graduates are still unable to find the right jobs (Humayun, 2022).

Employability theories such as the Human Capital Theory and Employability Theory are useful theories in understanding employment and education relationship. Becker (1993) Human Capital Theory holds that education will increase the skills and abilities of people hence increasing the value of labour in the market. However, this view has been criticised to be simplistic in its methods of determining the determinants of employability since it does not factor in any external factors like institutional support or industry cooperation (Yorke, 2006). Employability Theory on the other hand assumes that employability is not only based on academic qualifications but a combination of individual qualities as well as institutional practices (Yorke and Knight, 2006). The same view takes into consideration the teaching quality, curriculum design, career counselling, and work placements that all play a role in the ability of a graduate to secure a job.

Pakistan Higher education Commission (HEC) has also implemented quality assurance systems that will help improve the quality of education in all the Pakistani universities with a clear objective of improving the employability of graduates. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks in bridging the quality-employability gap has been doubted. According to Akhtar and Rauf (2011), as much as accreditation and quality assurance measures cannot be done without, they mainly focus on regulatory compliance as opposed to enhancement of teaching and learning outcomes that directly influence employability. Moreover, according to Raza, Sarwar and Shah (2020), as Pakistani institutions are making efforts to improve the quality of academic programs, many of them have to face challenges in the form of the outdated course material, lack of adequate faculty training, and the lack of industry connections, which derail the capability of graduates to align with employer expectations.

There is limited empirical research on the concept of quality and employability of higher-education in Pakistan, particularly in terms of qualitative studies on the same. Although quantitative studies have been mainly concerned with the rate of employment and skill gaps, the study has not been done on the experiences and perceptions of major stakeholders, such as graduates, faculty, and employers, with respect

to the variables that enable employability. An example is a recent study of Gulzar and Khanam (2025), who concluded that employers often blame universities because they do not provide graduates with the practical skills required to be successful at the workplace, which include problem-solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication. Correspondingly, Humayun (2022) contends that job prerequisites such as relevant work experience and soft skills are not always involved in graduates, which means that there is a serious disconnection between educational activities and employment demand.

The ongoing challenge is the lack of collaboration between institutions of higher learning and the industry in Pakistan. It is a common thing that employers complain about graduates being unprepared to face the reality of the workplace and this is partly because of the lack of exposure to actual applications (Khan et al., 2021). This lack of industry-university cooperation is generally considered as one of the key obstacles to enhancing graduate jobability. The institutions often do not offer students sufficiently good internships, apprenticeships, or placements in industries which would provide the experience that employers seek. Besides, most graduates do not have access to effective career-counselling services offered by universities, which explains why they do not have the help they require to manoeuvre the job market successfully (Gulzar & Khanam, 2025). Although the literature on the quality and employability of higher education is continuing to grow, the majority of research has applied quantitative research designs such as surveys and statistical data to evaluate the rate of employability and skill mismatch. Whereas such studies are valuable in terms of their data, they may in many cases not capture the fine tune perceptions and experiences of the stakeholders involved in the education-employability continuum. The qualitative research that explores the lived experiences of graduates, faculty and employers is essential in the view of developing the contextual factors that eventually inform the outcomes of employability. This paper aims to fill this gap by presenting a qualitative examination of the determinants of graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan with insights that would be useful in helping

universities, policymakers, and employers to improve the match between education and labour-market demands.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the investigation is based on two major theories Human Capital Theory and Employability Theory. These theoretical lenses can help shed light on the connection between tertiary education, skills development, and graduate employability and hence the analysis of the role of the quality indicators, which include curriculum applicability, pedagogical performance, and organizational connection, in contributing to graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan.

The Human Capital Theory as defined by Becker (1993) argues that making investments in education increases the skills, knowledge and capabilities of individuals hence increasing their productivity and value in the labour market. In this theory, education is an investment that seeks returns in enhancing the ability of a person to do his or her job, to solve problems and adjust to emerging challenges in the workplace (Becker, 1993). This school of thought considers education as a process to increase employability by providing an individual with relevant qualifications and skills to be employed. Under the current research, the Human Capital Theory confirms that the educational level determines the employability and that institutions of higher learning must focus on imparting skills that can be directly transferred to the labour market and therefore make graduates to become more competitive and employable.

Critics though suggest that Human Capital Theory is too simplistic since it only focuses more on formal education and ignores the general contextual elements of institutional practice, social capital and labour market dynamics (Becker, 1993). Though it can never be denied that higher education plays a decisive role, this theory fails to explain the presence of other driving forces that can contribute significantly to the gap between education and employability outputs; it includes industry collaboration and career services (Yorke and Knight, 2006).

In comparison the Employability Theory provides a more comprehensive way of considering the complex nexus of education and

employability. Yorke (2006) argues that employability cannot be a qualification alone but it must have a mixture of skills, attributes, and experiences that together can add up to improve an individual ability to obtain and maintain employment. The main point that is highlighted in this theory is that employability is not only determined by academic qualifications but also by individual attributes like communication skills, problem-solving skills, and work experience (Yorke and Knight, 2006). Employability Theory recognizes the important role played by higher education institutions in developing these skills both in curricular and extracurricular programs. It points to the importance of evaluating the employability competencies into the curriculum and the ability to afford students the opportunities to participate in the internship, industry placements and career development programmes. The theory argues that the universities should not be just a place where the students are provided with the knowledge but rather they should be the institutions that help the students acquire the skills that they need to succeed in the job market.

In this study, the Employability Theory is used as a critical instrument that can be used to determine how higher education quality indicators, which include teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and institutional support services, determine the employability of graduates. It highlights the fact that the results of employability are not solely predetermined by academic performance, but also influenced by a wide range of the institutional practices and the experiences that help to develop the skills that make it possible to secure employment.

The integration of Human Capital Theory and Employability Theory provides a holistic map on the analysis of the influence of different facets of the quality of higher education in graduate employability. The Human capital Theory emphasizes the importance of educational investments in improving employability, but the Employability Theory goes further to clarify the importance of developing non-academic skills and the role of universities in helping students to move into the workforce. Collectively, these theories support the research on the connection between educational quality indicators and employability outcome in Punjab, Pakistan, to

establish the important institutional determinants that affect the outcome of employability, as well as to study how graduates, faculty, and employers perceive the determinants.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of the present research outlines the main determinants that have an impact on the graduate employability in the context of higher education in Punjab, Pakistan. The framework is based on the theoretical basis of Human Capital Theory and Employability Theory and is used to demonstrate how the indicators of quality of education are interconnected with practices in institutions and the outcomes of employability. It is also meant to direct the qualitative investigation of the study on the issues that influence the employability of graduates and the perceptions of the key stakeholders in the study, the graduates, the faculty, and the employers as to what influences the employability of graduates.

The key point in the framework is the higher education quality indicators that are divided into three general areas: teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and institutional support. Teaching quality is the ability of instructors to deliver knowledge and develop critical thinking and problem solving among other employability skills. Curriculum relevance refers to the emphasizing of the academic content in relation to the industrial needs, and how practically relevant skills can be incorporated into the academic programmes. The services provided by the institutions under the category of institutional support include career counselling, internship, industry collaborations, and other services that will help students transforming their education and employment.

The framework assumes the quality indicators interact directly to affect the outcomes of employability. According to the Employability Theory, the employability outcomes include soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, adaptability) and hard skills (e.g., technical competencies, industry-specific knowledge) but without which graduates cannot achieve success in the labour market. The framework suggests that the best-qualified teaching, the applicability of the selected curricula and the strength of the

institutional support offered by higher education institutions can adequately equip graduates to match the expectations of the employers and find a job. In addition, the views of the main stakeholders' graduates, members of the faculty and employers determine the employability outcomes as they assess the effectiveness of education through their own lenses and expectations.

The framework also highlights how the expectations of the employers and the challenges that the graduate faces in adjusting between education and employment. Curriculum design and teaching practices in higher education institutions are informed by employer expectations such as the need to acquire certain skills and competencies. On the other hand, upon their graduation, graduates might be disadvantaged in situations where the education system does not equip them with the skills needed to get employment, including no work experience, exposure in the industry, and poor career advice.

Finally, according to the framework, the way to close the divide between education and employability is to improve the quality of education and increase the interaction between higher education institutions and businesses. In recognizing the contributory factors in the educational system such as the quality of teaching, relevance of the curriculum and the institutional support, this study aims at investigating how institutions of higher learning in Punjab may equip graduates better to suit the job market.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper uses a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the connection between quality indicators of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan. The qualitative inquiry is especially suitable to this study since it will be used to develop a detailed picture of the experiences, perceptions and the challenges faced by the major stakeholders, which are the graduates, faculty, and employers. This is because the qualitative approach of study will help reveal the multifaceted and complicated aspects of graduate employability that cannot be understood with quantitative studies.

**Research Design:** The paper follows a phenomenological method which is normally applied in qualitative research in order to explore lived experiences and perceptions. Phenomenology focuses on a better understanding of how people make sense of their experiences and the ways in which this sense making influences behaviour and decision making (Creswell, 2013). In the current study, the phenomenological approach will allow the researcher to examine how the graduates, faculty and employers understand quality of higher education and its effects on employability. This method will help determine the connotations that the education quality indicators have and how these perceptions influence the results of employability.

**Population and Sampling Strategy:** The population to be selected in this research includes graduates, faculty members, and employers in Punjab, Pakistan, who directly or are affected by the higher education system. Graduates will give feedback on their experience in school and what was possible after graduating in terms of employment opportunities and more so the skills and knowledge that they have gained at the universities. Faculty members provide insights on the curriculum, pedagogical practices, and institution practices that they consider to have an impact on the employability. Employers explain what they expect of graduates, what they need them to do, and how they believe graduates are ready to join the workforce.

To sample the participants, a purposive sampling method will be used to sample the people who have had first hand experience on the study subject. This is an appropriate approach to use in qualitative research because it enables the researcher to select respondents who have specialised knowledge or experience in the area of research (Patton, 2002). I was used a sample consisting of 10-15 graduates, 5 faculty, and 6 employers so that all main perspectives of the stakeholders are represented. Theoretical saturation was used to determine the sample size in which the data will be collected up to the time no new data and insights was identified.

**Data Collection Methods:** The semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, as they were presented a certain level of flexibility and maintain the discussion of the main points.

Semi-structured interviews were also suited to qualitative research because, they allow the participants to express their experiences and perceptions in their own language thus giving an interview a structured and flexible outline. The interview guide was aimed at exploring the opinions of the participants regarding the quality of higher education, skills that participants believe are vital in the labour market, and the involvement of educational organizations in equipping graduates to enter the labor market. The interviews are going to be conducted either face to face or using video conferencing depending on the availability and location of the participants.

The analysis of documents was also be employed to develop expertise on the use of employability programmes by universities in Punjab by analysing specific institutional documentation, including university curricula, quality assurance reports, and policy documents on employability to gain a better idea of the nature of their application, and how they manage to measure their effectiveness.

The data collected was analysed via thematic analysis, which is generally a well-known technique in qualitative studies of identifying, analysing, and reporting the patterns or themes in data. Thematic analysis supports the arrangement and description of information in a poignant way. The analysis are consists of coding interview transcripts and documents, determining important themes and subthemes, and analysing the results regarding the research questions.

### **Findings**

The results of the paper provide a subtle understanding of the manner in which measures of better education in Punjab, Pakistan, influence graduate employability. An interview data analysis conducted by a thematic approach revealed the identification of the following key themes, which are listed below. These themes summarise the feelings of graduates, faculty staff and employers on quality of higher education and how it aligns with the requirements of the labour market.

**Curriculum Relevance:** One of the most salient themes that come out of the data is the applicability of the curriculum to the needs of the industry nowadays. The graduates and

employers expressed their concern about the outdated nature of many university curricula that in many cases do not match the fast-changing demands of the labour market. Graduates claimed that they learned theoretical knowledge in their studies but were not ready to implement that knowledge in a practical situation in their working environments. Employers shared these sentiments and insisted on the fact that freshly graduated individuals usually have no technical skills and on-the-job experience that would enable them to meet the demands of the workforce. An example is an employer in an IT industry, who said, "The curriculum lacks the latest technologies or tools that are currently used in the industry, when a graduate is hired by the company, they are often lagging behind. Members of the faculties recognized that there is a need to reform the curriculum but also cited institutional barriers including limited resources and lack of industry support that hampers frequent revision of the curriculum.

**Teaching Quality:** Another evident theme deals with quality of teaching, which is seen by graduates and faculty as a determinant of employability of critical nature. The participants emphasized the essence of effective pedagogical practices in increasing the understanding and capacity acquiring of the skills in students. Graduates said that despite the faculty using innovative teaching methods, most of the faculty continued using old time teaching methods where the teaching methods used was not able to develop critical thinking or practical skills. Faculty members mentioned the issue of trying to balance the theory and practice with limited resources and time. One of the faculty members noted, we are trying to use discussions and case studies to engage the students but it is hard to have an active learning experience when the classes are large and we cannot get real data. Employers also insisted on strong problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and abilities in the graduates, which they believed were not well cultivated in the classroom.

**Career Services and Institutional Support:** The third important theme relates to the institutional support in the process of increasing employability. According to both graduates and employers, the shortcomings in career services, internship, and industry connections were

found to be the biggest hindrances to graduate employability. There was frequent reported inadequacy in overall career counselling and little help on job placement as indicated by graduates. The lack of formal support structures was widely noticed by many graduates who mentioned that they were using personal contacts or external agencies to get access to opportunities. This gap was also noted by faculty members, who proposed that universities needed to engage more with industry to offer internship and work-based learning. One of the faculty members commented that there is a growing demand by universities to have industry collaborations that can make them able to offer students real-life experience, which would make them more employment-fit upon graduation. Employers observed that graduates with an internship background or those who were exposed to industry practices in their educational courses were in a better position to join the workforce compared to their counterparts as they had a more practical knowledge of their subject.

**Skills Mismatch:** One of the central themes that emerged in all stakeholder groups is associated with the skills gap between university training and employee demands. Graduates have always complained that although their education gave them a good educational background, they did not give them practical, technical or soft skills that are necessary in the job market. This gap was seen by employers as a frustration, especially in such areas of engineering, healthcare, and business where specialized skills are critical. One employer in the engineering sector expressed it with the following, "We often have to re-train graduates since they are not hands-on; they understand theory well but have difficulty with practice. The members of the faculty also noted that the gap between education and employability is rapidly widening because industry demands are changing faster than the institutions can cope. Faculty admitted that higher education institutions are seeking to introduce more applied competencies into courses, but limited by inefficient resources and little interaction with practitioners in the workplace.

**Graduate Problems on the Workplace:** The last theme that was found is the issues that graduates face in the job market. Most of the graduates

complained about the lack of readiness to enter the competitive job market and felt that they were not sure how to handle themselves throughout the job application process, resume writing, and the interviewing process. Standard graduates had little knowledge of job-search skills and access to a small amount of networking opportunities, which hindered their ability to obtain jobs. Employers emphasized that many graduates have academic credentials, but they often fail to have the necessary professional skills and work experience that will make them stand out. As the focus of one employer, we need graduates who can jump into the deep end; nevertheless, many of the new employees require considerable training because of limited exposure to the industry. The same feeling was voiced by graduates, who insisted that lack of professional experience was a serious barrier to getting a job despite having the corresponding degrees in the major.

**Employer Expectations:** One of the common trends in employer interviews is that of having industry-ready graduates. Employers gave a wish of an applicant that would help the organization to achieve its goals within the first day without having to be trained extensively. They stressed that a graduate must not just possess strong academic qualifications but they must also have practical skills like teamwork, communication, and adaptability. These are the expectations that are crucial to success in the dynamic work environment that is fast-paced. One of the marketing sector employers stated, that they are in need of graduates who are proactive, self-manage, and have the interpersonal skills to work in a team. This theme defines the gap between university education and what employers expect new graduates to do.

### **Discussion**

The results of the present study are enlightening with several essential understandings being realized about the nexus between quality indicators of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan. The analysis prefigures the importance of the currency relevance, the quality of the teaching process, the support of the institution, and the correspondence between the educational process and the industry demand in the context of the formation of employable outcomes. The

findings are presented against the background of the available literature, theoretical models and the general context of higher education in Pakistan.

### **Relevance and Employability of Curriculum:**

The salience of relevance of curriculum comes out as a leading finding. There are warnings by scholars and practitioners alike that the many university programmes have become obsolescent thus hindering the process of aligning them to the current labour market needs. This observation is similar to previous studies on growing disconnectivity between the academic curriculum and the demands of the industry (Humayun, 2022; Gulzar and Khanam, 2025). The gap remains as one of the major challenges in the higher education system in Pakistan. It is one of the recommendations of the study that universities in Punjab should step up interaction with industry stakeholders in the light of having curricula regularly updated per present trends and technological development. This proactive adaptation would provide the graduates with the skills that would be essential in the dynamic labour market.

### **Quality and Its Impacts on Employability:**

Another important theme that came out was teaching quality. Both graduates and employers agreed that there was need to have strong pedagogical strategies towards developing employability skills like critical thinking, problem solving and communication. This is in line with the arguments of Yorke (2006) who argues that instructional excellence is central in developing employability competencies. The study found out that although some faculty had tested new approaches, the number who still used lecture-based practices that do not impart the required skills were numerous. The results imply that the faculty development programmes should see the possible advantages of using active learning and student-centred strategies as priorities. The quality of teaching can be raised to give the students the ability to attain skills that are necessary to achieve vocational success.

**Institutional Support and Career Services:** It was found that institutional support was a decisive factor. According to graduates, there was a lack of career counselling, internships, and industry affiliations, which are among the deficiencies

noted in previous studies (Gulzar and Khanam, 2025; Humayun, 2022). Employers remarked that experiential learning programs including internships have a strong impact on the readiness of graduates. The study therefore recommends focusing more on the development of effective career services, organised internship programs as well as strategic industry partnerships. Such steps will help to fill the gap between the academic learning and workplace expectations, and thus support the employability paths.

### **Mismatch of Skills and Expectations of the Employer:**

The outlined skills gap highlights the continuity of discrepancy between university programs and the needs of the employers, repeating the trends found by Khan et al. (2021) and Humayun (2022). Employers are insistent on the need to ensure graduates can prove their not only academic competence, but also actual working competence. Graduates, on the other hand, do not view their education as being practically oriented and not in line with the real world. To fill this gap, it is important that more attention to the development of soft skills and experiential learning be paid to the curricula. This gap and high rates of employability can be mitigated by involving students in internships and joint projects in industries.

**Job Market Problems of the Graduates:** The research also outlines issues facing graduates in the process of getting a job. Graduates claim insufficient preparation to application processes, resume writing, and interview skills, which is shown by Gulzar and Khanam (2025). Employers corroborate the point that the graduates most of the time do not have a pragmatic experience that is necessary to fit in the workplace. Therefore, the universities must not only focus on academic merit but extend their focus to provide students with resources and training on how to navigate the job-market perfectly. The promise of career services, resumes workshops, and interview preparation modules is to boost the confidence of the graduates and their employability opportunities.

**Employee Expectations and Industry Requirements:** The expectations of the employers are central. Employers require graduates with the ability to easily adapt to

organisational processes, who do not just have academic credentials but also the best soft and practical competency. This position compares with the statement made by Yorke (2006) that employability involves personal qualities other than academic performances. The feeling of frustration about the current skills gap encourages the universities to develop closer ties to the industries, making sure that the curricula is responsive to the changing demands of the labour market. Creation of strategic alliances is crucial to developing graduates who can provide value to the industry at their start.

### Conclusion

The paper provides useful information that can be used to understand the relationship between the indicators of quality of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan. The results highlight the fact that although universities in Punjab are graduating significant number of individuals, the correspondence amid the education offered and requirements of the job market is still an issue. The five main aspects identified, that are, the relevance of curriculum, the quality of teaching, support of the institution, and the skills gap between the education system and the industry needs can help highlight areas of the reforms that are necessary in the higher education system to enhance graduate employability.

The analysis shows that the relevance of the curriculum in most universities is often backward and does not respond to the fast-changing requirements of the employment sector. Both the students and the employers had indicated that there was a strong disparity in theoretical and practical skills that were required in the job market. In addition, although quality of teaching cannot be overlooked in producing employable graduates, the research established that the traditional lecture-based pedagogies are more often not enough in enabling students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Also, institutional support in form of career services, internships and industry connections were reported to be lacking and the graduates were left without the hands-on experience and career counselling that they need in between the education and workplace.

Mismatch of skills between requirements taught in universities and employer requirements is a

long-term chronic problem. Graduates are often deficient in technical and soft skills that are important to the employers, including adaptability, communication, and teamwork. These skills disconnect highlights why universities need to incorporate more industry-relevant content in their programs and why they need to be able to afford students the chance to receive an experiential learning opportunity. Moreover, the employer demands have also changed with the requirement of not only the academic requirements but also the work-readiness and practicability experience that, hence, increases the significance of the university-industry relationships.

The difficulties experienced by the graduates in the job market also outline the insufficient attention given by universities towards preparing students into the workforce. There is a lack of/ or underdevelopment of career services which might be a key tool in educating the education-employment divide. The challenges experienced by graduates in applying and in the job market, as well as in the workforce, indicate that more aggressive career development programs are required in tertiary institutions.

Overall, this study highlights the necessity of smaller institutions of higher learning in Punjab to keep up with the dynamic nature of the labor market. Universities need to give more attention to curriculum changes, improvement of teaching practices, institutional support, and strengthening industry partnerships in a bid to equip graduates with the workforce. Through the fix of these issues, universities will be able to help create a more employable graduate pool, and thus benefit individual students, as well as affect the overall economic growth and development in Punjab and countries in general.

### Recommendations

On the basis of the results of the current research, multiple policy and institutional suggestions are furthered aiming at closing the divides between the quality indicators of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan. These proposals are meant to increase the alignment between the academic outcomes and industry demands hence increasing the employability of the graduates.

**Policy Recommendations :** The first and most important suggestion is that of curriculum

change and incorporation into industry. Policymakers ought to encourage universities to revise and update their curricula in a systematic manner with the cooperation of the industry players. This kind of reform would ensure that curricula does not just provide a good academic base but also equip such skills and knowledge that are directly related to the labor market. There is a pressing need to ensure that the universities incorporate practical and industry-specific skills to their programs to remain competitive in the ever-changing work environment. In addition to that, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and provincial governments should develop frameworks that will foster a constant interaction between universities and industries so that both can adapt to the new trends and needs in the industry. Experts in the industry are also invited to participate in curriculum development, hence providing students with the practical skills that are in high demand in employers.

The second policy recommendation that is critical is the enhancement of career development and guidance in the universities. The government must invest in the improvement of career counselling services whereby the universities should provide holistic services to guide students in their career paths. This will involve job application, interview tips, and networking tips. Moreover, the policymakers ought to come up with incentives to encourage the universities to collaborate with companies and organisations to offer students access to internships and work placements. Universities have the potential to enhance career guidance and professional development programmes by making them more attuned to the demands that students face on entering the job market.

Industry-university partnerships are important policy suggestions that should be promoted. The policymakers need to support the initiatives that can help in enhancing the relationship between universities and industries through joint research projects, internship and training programmes. Such collaborations would equip students with practical knowledge and the skills that cannot be attained without field experiences to secure their employment. Governments will be able to encourage industries to provide internship and work-based

learning programs, which will expose students to the real working conditions. This kind of collaborative work would help bridge the gap between academics and the industry requirements and hence make graduates more employable.

**Institutional Recommendations:** The active learning and teaching innovation should be emphasized at the institutional level. Punjab universities need to go beyond the past lecture-based modes of pedagogy and embrace more student-centred approaches to learning. The training should involve faculty in active learning methods such as problem-based learning, case studies, and group work methods that develop skills of critical thinking, creativity and practical problem solving. Through these approaches, universities will be assured that not only will the graduates be academically competent but also fit well enough to meet the dynamism of the workforce. The faculty development programmes are supposed to be conducted periodically to help instructors in keeping up with the new teaching methods and best practices.

As well, universities need to streamline their curriculums in order to bring employability skills. Technical expertise is essential but employers are more demanding of graduates who have a strong set of soft skills, including communication, collaboration, management, and flexibility. The competencies should be incorporated in the formal and co-curricular programs of universities. These crucial skills can be developed through workshops, seminars and leadership programmes which are likely to equip students better to work in their environments. In addition, universities ought to promote student participation in community service, internship, and group projects because such experience produces transferable skills that are highly demanded by employers.

Building up alumni networks and mentorship programmes also should be a priority of the universities. Universities can also offer meaningful career advice to their graduates by linking them with professionals in the industry through mentorship programs and help them establish professional networks. The alumni networks may provide information on different careers, job search plans, and trends in the

industry. Furthermore, the networks can be used by the universities to enable the internships and job placements thus enabling the students to have access to jobs through the alumni networks. This strategy helps existing students and develops long-term relationships between higher education institutions and their alumni, which is beneficial to both the stakeholders.

The expansion of internship and work-placement opportunities can be viewed as a be-all recommendation to the institution. Colleges should develop strong relationships with organizations to be able to afford more students exposure to more practical learning. The implication of this is the necessity of imparting practical experience and the development of skills which are directly relevant to future employment through internships, apprenticeships and work-based learning programmes. Universities need to establish avenues where students can have industry experience throughout their coursework because that exposure will make the student more employable as they will have real world experience and a more detailed insight into the expectations of the industry.

**Employer Recommendation:** Employers play an important role in enhancing graduate employability. The main suggestion that could be made to employers is to have industry-university discussions where employers state their requirements in terms of skills. Frequent feedbacks given by employers can help the universities to adjust their curricula to meet the needs of the job market. The employers are also expected to work closely with universities to ensure that they get graduates with job ready capabilities with both technical and soft skills that are necessary to succeed in the job market. Employers are supposed to initiate additional internship and training programmes to students. Employers facilitate students in the application of classroom knowledge by providing them with practical working experiences which are practical and hands-on. Such programmes have a two-fold advantage: students obtain some valuable work experience and employers obtain a chance to check potential employees.

Employers can also engage in graduate employability by offering post graduation training and development programmes. This kind of initiative assists graduates in closing the

existing skills gaps and in being prepared to be successful in their job. Constant improvement of the profession also ensures that the graduates are in a position to adjust to changes in the industry, thus increasing their chances of advancing their careers in the long run.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Even though this study provides considerable pieces of research information on the nexus between the quality of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan, there are a number of limitations that should be noted. These are constraints in the scope of the study, the methodology and generalisability.

To begin with, the study has a limited geographical coverage as it covers Punjab, Pakistan. Although the Punjab province is the biggest in Pakistan and has a relatively large number of higher institutions of learning, the results might not be able to fully represent the experiences of graduates and stakeholders in other provinces. There might be regional differences in educational practices, employability outcomes, as well as industry requirements and, therefore, this limits the generalization of the findings to the national level. Further investigation may expand the study to other provinces, hence providing a more in-depth insight into the field of higher education and employability in the country.

Another limitation is the sample size. Albeit the fact that purposive sampling strategy was used to pick a generalised sample size, the fact that the sample size is relatively modest may limit the insight that can be gained through divergent demographic and institutional views. In qualitative research, the size of the sample is usually identified by data saturation, which was also attained in the given research; however, a larger sample would have improved the results. The researchers could include in future studies a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the representativeness of data.

The qualitative character of the research means that the results will be dependent on the perceptions and personal experiences of the participants. Although this method is a costly method of understanding the factors that affect employability, it is vital to note that the results cannot be objective or quantifiable. The opinions expressed by the participants can be

influenced by their own biases, experiences or rather the socio-economic environment they are working in. Despite the use of some methods like member checking, audit trails to increase credibility, the results end up being personalized and not absolute truths.

The research mostly depends on interviews and analysis of documents as a source of data collection. Although semi-structured interviews are more elaborate in their data, they also have the inherent problems of self-reporting where the interviewee might not be able to fully describe his or her experiences and he or she might be responding to what he/she thinks is socially desirable.

The document analysis, though useful in the triangulation of interview data, provides a partial picture of the practices of institutions as it only captures the official policies as opposed to the lived experiences of the students or the faculty. The use of additional techniques, e.g. surveys or observational studies, might result in a more comprehensive picture of the problem.

The research is largely devoted to the graduate, faculty, and employer perceptions, thus, omitting the other important stakeholders (policymakers, higher education administration). These organizations would help bring more insights on systemic issues affecting higher education and employability in Punjab.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

Although the current study has provided useful information on the correlation between quality of higher education and graduate employability in Punjab, Pakistan, there are still some opportunities to conduct further researches. The continuance of this study based on the research questions would help to further understand the issues and prospects regarding employability and higher education, as applied to Pakistan as well as globally.

To begin with, further studies can be conducted to compare the provinces or regions in Pakistan. Even though the current research focused on Punjab, the experience of graduates in other provinces like Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan might be different because of the differences in the educational systems, industry requirements, and the economic situation of the region. Comparative method would provide a more extensive understanding of the national

issues related to higher education quality and employability, thus allowing making more general inferences.

Second, longitudinal studies should be conducted which will monitor the development of graduates. Although the given research centered on the immediate impressions of graduates, faculty, and employers, a longitudinal approach would allow the researchers to determine the employability of graduates over a long time. Using the career paths of graduates between time of graduation and subsequent employment and advancement, future studies can provide information regarding the effectiveness of higher education institutions in preparing graduates to achieve long-term employment and job satisfaction.

The other way of direction that would be of value in future research would be to explore the sector-specific employability issues. Various industries have different requirements concerning skills and qualification. As an example, the needs of graduates that enter into the information technology (IT) market might vary significantly compared to the requirements of the graduates that enter healthcare or engineering markets. The study of particular industries might provide more specific suggestions on the curriculum structure, pedagogical approach, and industry collaborations that would support the unique needs of the industry. This in its turn would help universities to match their programs with industry specific requirements and thus increase graduate employability on the industry specific areas.

In the future research, mixed-methods research might be applied to provide an in-depth examination of the problems of employability. Whereas, qualitative research provides profound information about the perceptions of the participants, quantitative data may be used to supplement this information and present more significant analysis of the trends and patterns. As an illustration, a more significant number of graduates, faculty and employers could be surveyed, which would allow quantifying the rates of employability, skills gaps, and satisfaction with the quality of higher education. Policy-oriented studies examining the contribution of government programmes to improving employability may provide further

information on the impacts of government policies on graduate outcomes on the national and provincial levels. This kind of research may focus on how effective career -development programs are, how much accreditation standards are implemented, and whether universities receive government funding to help them implement employability-enhancing initiatives. Through understanding of the policy environment, researchers would be in a position to suggest the strategies in order to supplement government policy of employability programmes and institutional reforms.

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