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Title Effect of Gender and Course of Study on Students' Self-Perceived Employability (SPE)
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Background

Self-perception of employability refers to students' perceptions and beliefs about their likelihood of success in the graduate labour market. Self-conception is an expression of self-awareness and self-belief, which are crucial components of employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Pitan, 2016a,b;). It has been observed that raising student self-awareness and strengthening self-confidence can be more important for enhanced employability than individual skills and competences (Lees, 2002). Moreover, for a better understanding of employability, an exploration of these self-concepts and their determinants is required (Qenani, MacDougall, & Sexton, 2014). Studies (see, for instance Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Pitan, 2016a; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007) have suggested that several factors can serve as determinants of SPE. These factors include individual knowledge and skills, attitudes, dispositions, and personality traits. Also, Moreau and Leathwood (2006) argue that contrary to the assumption of a level playing field in which students' skills and personal qualities are the key to their employability, some demographic characteristics such as social class, gender, ethnicity, age, field of study, disability and university attended have influence on self-perception. Studies on SPE abound (Al-Harathi, 2011; Goodman & Tredway, 2016; Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Pitan, 2016a,b; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012; Walker & Fongwa, 2017), but very few have delved into the analysis of the main effects and interaction effects of demographic characteristics on students' SPE using factorial analysis. In this study, we focus on two specific characteristics – gender and course of study - and using factorial analysis we explore the effects of these characteristics, and interactions between them, on students' perceptions of their employability.

This study is based on the following three assumptions:

1. Gender will have no significant effect on SPE
2. Course of study will have no significant effect on SPE
3. There will be no significant interaction effect between gender and course of study SPE

Literature Review

Al-Harthi (2011)'s study in Egypt and Oman showed that there were significant differences in students' perceptions of their employability according to their nationality, gender, and field of study. His study indicated that the students' field of study had only a small impact on their SPE, but show that female students were more motivated than their male counterparts to enter a career after university. On the contrary, looking at the influence of gender on employability in California, USA, Qenani et al. (2014) show that, male students feel 50% more confident in their employability skillset compared to female students. In Nigeria, Pitan and Adedeji (2016) found that there are variations in duration of unemployment according to graduates' fields of study and type of university attended while gender had no significant influence. Still in Nigeria, Akuegwu and Nwi-ue (2013) found that gender and ownership of universities significantly influence graduating students' possession of employability skills. Contrary to Akuegwu and Nwi-ue (2013), Jackson and Wilton (2017) found that age, gender and degree type produced just minor difference in skill outcomes among respondents in an Australian university. However, Walker and Fongwa, (2016) who carried out a qualitative study among students and lecturers in four universities in South Africa establish that course of study in relation to employability is affected by demand side factors, which are not 'natural' but shaped by a discourse of 'scarce skills'. Thus, students in fields of study that are in greater demand appear to be more employable. They commented that Humanities and Social Science students are especially affected in this regard while Accounting, Business and Commerce students and Engineering students perceive positive employment prospects due to the demand for graduates with their qualifications.

Methodology

Data was collected from a sample of 402 final year students in two universities (in the same province) in South Africa with the use of an adapted questionnaire (Milner, 20018). Using Cronbach's alpha method, the reliability coefficient of the survey instrument was 0.860 ($\alpha > 0.7$). A two-way (factorial) analysis of variance was conducted on the influence of two independent variables, gender and course of study, on students' perceived employability. Gender consists of two levels (female and male) and course of study consists of four levels (Management Studies, Education, Law and Science & Agriculture).

Results

Results of the two-way ANOVA show that all effects were statistically significant except for the interaction effect of gender and course of study. The main effect for gender yielded an F ratio of $F(1, 393) = 5.88, p < 0.05$ indicating that SPE differs significantly between men ($M = 24.28, SD = 4.00$) and women ($M = 23.18, SD = 4.7$). The main effect for course of study yielded an F ratio of $F(3, 393) = 10.39, p < 0.001$, which also indicates that course of study has significant influence on students' perceived employability. Education ($M = 25.68, SD = 3.49$); Law ($M = 23.35, SD = 4.43$); Management Studies ($M = 23.43, SD = 4.21$); Science and Agriculture ($M = 22.30, SD = 4.85$). The interaction effect was insignificant, however $F(3, 393) = 0.990 > 0.05$.

Discussion

The results from the study generally reveal that the sampled students demonstrate reasonably high levels of perceived employability. However, there are variations between gender and across different fields of study.

Effect of Gender on SPE

The ANOVA result for effect of gender on self-perceived employability shows that there is a significant difference in SPE between males and females. That is, the male students demonstrated higher level of SPE than their female counterparts. This result implies that male students are more confident about their likelihood of success in the graduate labour market than females. This result is consistent with that of Qenani et al. (2014). The display of greater confidence by male students may be attributed to the fact that they consider themselves as having better chances in the labor market and therefore see themselves as more employable. Qenani et al. (2014) also suggested that, this particular result could be a reflection of the more communal nature of female self-perception (as against the self-identity nature of males) in that women are more likely to view themselves as being connected with and similar to those around them compared to males who tend to value a separation from the group. However, this result is in contrast to the findings of (Al-Harthi, 2011; Thiele, Singleton, Pope, & Stanistreet, 2016).

Effect of Course of study on SPE

In line with past studies (Pitan & Adedeji, 2016; Walker & Fongwa, 2017); course of study has significant effect on students' perceived employability. The implication of this finding is that there is variation in students' SPE across fields of study. Education students demonstrate a higher level of SPE followed by B. Com students, Law students and Science & Agriculture students in that order. Bonferroni post hoc tests show that SPE was similar for Law, Management Studies and Science & Agriculture students but differed significantly from that of Education students. Other studies of this nature (CHE, 2013; Moleke, 2006; Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012) have conceded that graduates of Humanities (in which Education is situated in the South African context) are less likely to find work after graduation compared to those from other courses especially Science related fields. Therefore, it is surprising that this does not affect the perceptions of Education students in this study. One of the reasons may be because Education is the only course of study considered in the College of Humanities in this study unlike other studies, which considered all the courses in Humanities including Arts and Social Sciences. In addition, Education students having more confidence about their employability upon graduation may be an indication that the students perceive Education (as a course of study) as a professional course whose graduates are known to stand a better chance of being absorbed quickly into the labour market than others (Pitan, 2010; Pitan & Adedeji, 2016) It should be noted that Engineering is not one of the courses considered under Science and Agriculture.

Implication

How highly employable students perceive themselves to be can result from a high level of support they receive from their university. Therefore, universities need to ensure the provision of appropriate conditions for enhanced SPE and should ensure that students are aware of these opportunities. In particular, the university needs to do more to enhance self-confidence among female students to feel secure of their identity, knowledge, and skills.