



**Creditability Gap: An Analysis of Employees' Capability and Employers' Expectation: The Case of St. Mary's College**

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## **Creditability Gap: An Analysis of Employees' Capability and Employers'**

### **Expectation: The Case of St. Mary's College**

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#### ***Abstract***

*The complex economic and social order of the present day world requires well trained and flexible labour force. In recognition of this fact, vocational education and training programmes manifestly state their intent of preparing graduates with competences that enable them to work effectively in modern organisations (QHE: 1994). In order for vocational education and training to be meaningfully useful to the economy, the demands of the work place should inform the curriculum. In deed, relevance in education is gauged against achievement of mission (Jacques and Peace: 1993).*

*Ethiopia Underwent a major education reform a decade ago and has since gradually rolled out a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme. As in the case in other countries, too, it is stipulated in the TVET policy that the economy will benefit from more trained and skilled labour' (ESDP: 1999)*

*This paper is therefore a modest attempt to evaluate how far the TVET programme has succeeded in preparing graduates for the work place, especially with reference to language competence. It tries to examine the extent 10+1 graduates can perform their activities in English. Particular reference is made to Secretarial Science and Office Management and Salesmanship students. International examinations, interviews and diary were used to collect data.*

#### **Introduction**

One of the principal goals of education is to prepare future citizens to live and work in the free market conditions. As a result, there is a need to create a direct link between the labour market and education which would allow for the higher utilization of the human potentials of the country (Fagerlind and Kanaev, 1997).

Jacques and Peace (1993) noted that any program in higher education is said to be relevant if it achieves its mission and meets the expectation of its stake holders by producing effective graduates for work. In other words, the prime objective of education is to produce productive graduates for the labour market. To this end, higher education institutions have to look into the quality of services they render. Those responsible for training in professional fields and disciplines will want to ensure that

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the program they offer and the degree they grant meet the high standards of relevance and quality (WBR, 2002).

In Ethiopia in recent years, the profile of graduates of the different educational programs have been under attack by employers and researchers (Amare and Temechew, 2002). Researchers such as Seyoum (1996), Tekeste (1996), Esayas (2001), Seleshi (2001) expressed their dissatisfaction on the educational policy of the country. Solomon (2001) also found out that the language competence of graduates was lower than the expectations of employers.

In order to overcome these and other problems, a new policy has been issued and TVET program has been introduced to give students sufficient towards ensuring the anticipation of the labour market. According to Nherera (1998) relevant education is seen as a means to equip pupils with skills that enable them to secure jobs in the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Although particular emphasis was placed on making it relevant to the formal employment sector, self employment was also considered as an objective of the scheme (Ibid).

In developing competence-based vocational training level qualifications, emphasis is placed primarily on "output", on encouraging the direct assessment of performance preferably in the work place as the preferred measure of competence (Neary, 2002).

In view of the above facts, the writers of this paper believe that graduates' performance in the work place can be a very good indicator of quality and relevance of the education policy. This paper therefore attempts to test the language competence of TVET graduates as required in the work place in a view to assess both issues of policy and implementation of the TVET programme.

## **Literature Review**

Neary (2002) argues the majority of the African population regarded education as a means into the formal employment sector and of improving their socio-economic situation. As a result, the education policy should reflect the needs of the employing institutions. How well these needs are treated is a major test for such programmes.

From the four aspects of university performance –input, process, output and results - output of higher education consists of the movements and performance of students and graduates (Belfield and Thomas, 2000, USNU, 1999 as cited by Smeenk and Jeelken, 2003). Furthermore, Neary (2002) claimed that competence based education is essentially concerned with performance in employment. That is, graduates performance in the work place is indicative of university achievement.

In the Ethiopian context too, the purpose of introducing the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Program is to provide sufficient supply of skilled and productive manpower for the economic development of the country (MOE, 2002).

In line with this, the major objective of training salespersons (year I, 10+3) program as stated in the TVET curriculum is to enable trainees to sell goods and services; display, wrap/pack and level items; handle customers; administer sales related records; conduct inventories and demonstrate a professional behavior ,etc.

On the other hand, it is stipulated in the curriculum that upon completion of a one year training in Secretarial Science and Office Management graduates are expected to be able to answer and make phone calls, type different letters and manuals accurately both in Amharic and English, receive and handle visitors, make appointments etc.

The success of the education system of the country is therefore measured against the objectives set for each programme of study. Basically, learning outcomes, which are statements of what learners are expected to know or be able to do at the end of a period of learning (Neary 2002), should meet the objectives set. By contrast, if differences occur between what is taught in the classroom and the realities of everyday life or if there is lack of a close link between tertiary education institutions and the labour market, the effect would be harmful for the educational process (WBR, 2002; Fagerlind and Kanaev, 1998). And, it clearly reveals that learners are ill-equipped to handle the demanding world of work.

Apart from ensuring a strong tie between the education system and the labour market, narrowing the gap between the national and global trends within the education system is another challenge to policy

makers. To be both compatible and competitive with other countries necessitates the readjustment of the education system to a global scale (Fagerlind and Kanaev, 1998). The increased international mobility of skilled human resources and the rising global labour market require the circulation of skills (WBR, 2002) which in turn demand constant readjustment of national curriculum. In relation to language, (Yawson 1998) underlined that the new African graduates must be a globally aware professional with social and communication skills, verbal and written presentations, persuasion and foreign language competence.

While trying to do this, policy makers should not heavily rely on western research output since it is hard to get a universal solution for a problem. Bucher (1998) further stated that relying on western research methods may be at the root of some of the educational problems which have continued to exist.

### **Needs and Lacks**

Scholars such as Allwright (1982) as cited by Jardon (1997) tried to make a distinction between needs, wants and lacks. For Allwright, needs refers to the skills which a student sees as being relevant to him or her whereas wants represent those needs on which the student puts a high priority in the available, limited time.

In the preparation of language lessons, there is a need to consider the needs of the learners and their present intellectual abilities. According to Jacobson (1986) learners needs in language have been defined specially in terms of knowledge, and skills needed for communication. In view of this, there is a need for looking into the language performance and competence of the learner as required in the work place.

For Allwright (1982) as cited by Jardon (1997) lack denotes the gap between the student's competence and the desired competence. In other words, lack is the gap between the required skills and current performance of the students. That is students might not have the desired skills that enable them to function in the work place. In relation to language, Solomon (2001) stated that although verbal communication skills, letter and report writing skills and the like were highly required by

employers, the actual skill level of graduates was far below the expectation. This is where the effectiveness of the curriculum, quality of teachers etc. raise doubts.

What is expected of the graduates in the work place is a transferable language competence. Here competence embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within the occupation area; it also includes organization planning of works, innovation and coping with non routine activities (The Standard Training Agency 1998 as cited by Neary, 2002).

### **Needs Analysis**

Dudley–Evans and St. John (1998) defined needs analysis as the process of establishing the what and how of a course. It is a major factor that determines the contents of a lesson and the way it is delivered. Owing to this, need analysis should be the starting point for devising programs, syllabus, materials and the kind of teaching and learning that takes place (Jordon, 1997).

In the area of needs analysis experts such as (Munby 1978) Ritchterick and Chancerel (1977/80), Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Nunan (1988), Holliday and Cooke (1982) as cited by Jordan (1997) proposed different approaches to needs analysis. Below are some of them:

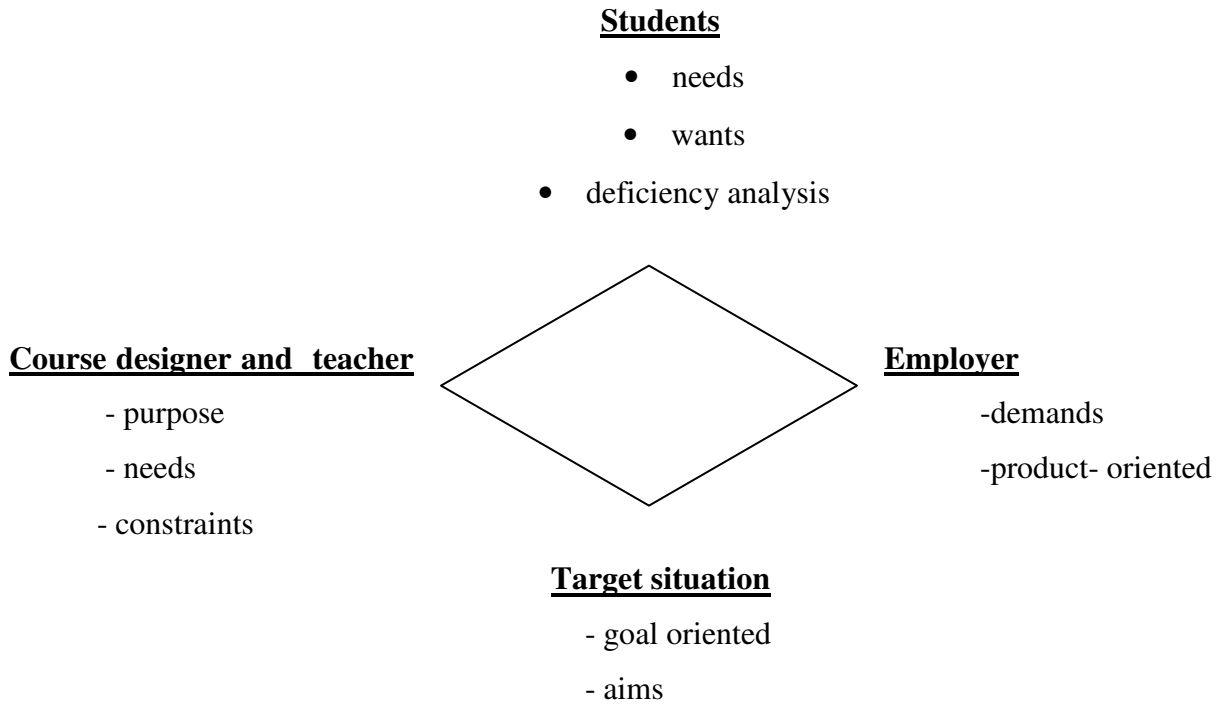
Target –situation analysis: - focuses on students' needs at the end of a language course; and the target level predominance (Menby 1978 cited by Jordan 1997).

Present-situation analysis: - ascertains the students' state of language development at the beginning of the language course (Ritchterick and Chancerel 1997/80).

Strategy analysis: - involves both methods of teaching and the preferred learning styles and strategies of students (Nunan, 1988).

Language audits: - which are large scale exercise in defining language needs carried out for companies regions or countries (West 1994).

In addition to the above different approaches to needs analysis Jordan (1997) also summarizes the needs analysis in the following diagram.



As it can be seen from the diagram, the needs of students, employers demand and the tasks of the designers/teachers should be taken into consideration in order to address the goal set.

Furthermore, processes and products of existing and proposed curriculum can be scrutinized to see how they fit the needs of learners, employers and the community (Neary, 2002).

As it has been stated so far, graduates have to meet the demands of the labour market. Recently, there has been a concerned attempt to promote and enhance the employers' role; so in education employers have increasingly become more influential and more involved in the training of their existing and prospective employees (Neary, 2002). It is absolutely important that employers and higher education institutions work closely. To this effect, the education structure should involve all national stakeholders and a critical dialogue must be established between all involved parties and national policy makers (Butcher, 1998, Harber, 1998)

**Data Analysis and Discussion**

As was mentioned earlier, work related learning outcomes are attached to each level of training. For the purpose of this study only 10+1 students from Secretarial Science and Office Management and Salesmanship programmes were considered. A total of 100 trainees were involved.

As the level of language competence required is not explicitly stated, the researchers had to develop the list of linguistic and skills required as implied in the profiles of graduates.

The table below summarises the linguistic and skill areas required for the two programmes of study.

Table 1 'Language Competence and Skills Required From Salespersons'

Activities	Linguistic and skill items	Remark
Sell goods and services	Language of persuasion, agreement and disagreement, negotiation, presentation and telephoning skills	
Display, wrap/pack and label items		
Handle customers	Letter writing	
Administer sales related records and conduct inventories	Interpreting data, descriptive writing	

Table 2 'Language Competence and Skills Required From SSOM Students'

Activities	Linguistic and skill areas	Remark
Answer and make phone calls	Note taking, telephoning Skills	
Type different letters and manuals		
Receive and handle visitors	Offering help, information;	
Make appointments	Note taking,	



While the above are specific language and skill areas required to do the job, a minimum of lower intermediate level of general English competence is also needed to be able to discharge the above duties properly.

In view of the above linguistic and skill descriptions appropriate written and spoken tests were administered. Given the shortage of time and other constraints, the researchers could not test all areas. Instead, only salient linguistic and skill areas were tested. To this effect, the speaking test used was the internationally accepted Pitman Business English Test. Ten students from each department took the speaking test.

Table 3 Students spoken English performance

Global Assessment Scale	Department			
	SSOM		Marketing M.	
Preliminary level	6	60%	7	70%
Access level	4	40%	3	30%
Achiever level	-	-	-	-
Communicator level	-	-	-	-
Expert level	-	-	-	-
Mastery level	-	-	-	-

As can be clearly seen in table 3, most of the respondents i.e. 60% and 70% from SSOM and Marketing Management departments respectively fall under the “Preliminary level”. This means that the subjects can only respond to simple, predictable follow-up prompts or language items. The remaining groups of respondents 40% of the SSOM students and 30% of the Marketing Management students were in the category of “access level”. This implies that respondents can only give a brief response to a familiar prepared topic although may occasionally run out of language and require some support from the listener.

In both levels, the subjects have a limited resource of specific vocabulary appropriate to the world of business. They cannot adequately respond to questions about personal business interests and experiences.

As it can be seen from the table, none of them was able to score the achiever level, expert and mastery levels of the global assessment scale.

The minimum level appropriate to undertake the activities with a reasonable degree of fluency and accuracy is the achiever level. To everyone's dismay though, none of the subjects achieved this level. A more detailed analysis reveals that almost all the subjects lack everyday communication expressions and are not able to comfortably perform even the simplest language functions such as introduction.

In today's world of globalization, where good command of English has become all the more important, such poor performance even in specific areas of specializations is a critical shortcoming.

The English language course book in use is not appropriate to the kind of study. It lacks relevant language awareness activities and appropriate contexts. This is not however to blame all the problems on the text book. An excellent course material is as good as how well it is used by the teachers and students. Although the researchers haven't been able to research the causes, they have the observation that this is a result of a set of intertwined problems, of which the text book is one.

The second set of questions was multiple type questions. This time different tests were administered. They tested functional vocabulary and expressions. The tests were adapted from the Longman Test Your English for Marketing and Test Your English for Secretarial Science Series.

Table 4 'Marketing students overall English performance'

Scores of Students	Department	
	Marketing Management	
	Count	Percent
1-20	3	6%
21-40	12	24%
41-50	19	38%
51-65	7	14%
66-80	7	14%
81-90	2	4%
91-100	-	-
Total	50	100%

68% of the sample population scored below average. 14% of 10+1 marketing students made an average score ranging from 51-65. On the other hand, 14% and 4% of the sample students had good and very good scores respectively.

As mentioned earlier, the test was meant to assess their functional vocabulary and the results are not very impressive. It is understood that as common and key terms and expressions in the area, they are regularly used in major course discussions and lectures. Their inability to recognize these vocabulary and expressions could possibly mean several things: there is excessive use of mother tongue in major course classes, students do not comprehend lectures but manage their studies in several other ways such as translating lecture notes to the mother tongue afterwards, etc.

Table 5 'Secretarial science students' performance'

Scores of students	Department	
	SSOM	
	Count	Percent
1-20	-	-
21-40	8	16%
41-50	20n	40%
51-65	9	18%
66-80	10	20
81-90	3	6%
91-100	-	-
Total	50	100%

As can be learnt from the table above, more than half of the respondents (56%) achieved below average. 18% of the sample subjects got an average score and 20% and 6% of the subjects achieved good and very good scores.

Although the raw scores look better than that of the marketing students, a lot remains to be required. As the test was on the very basic vocabulary and expressions needed every day, the trainees were supposed to score much higher marks. This again clearly shows that graduates language competence is far below what is expected, further attesting Solomon's finding (2001).

Overall, trainees' speaking skill level and functional vocabulary and expressions are very poor. Although the test covered only limited areas, the results are indicative of the general language level of the trainees.

**Conclusion**

Governments often expect their Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems to perform feats that they would not expect from other systems such as general education (Gill,

Fluitman and Dar 2000). So does Ethiopia. However, such expectations can be met only when the country has the right curriculum which clearly represents the needs of the market place, appropriate textbooks and skilled and dynamic trainers.

One of the fundamental skills is communication. With the advent of globalization and the ICT revolution, good command of English is no longer a luxury. The test results of both groups, however, show that the trainees do not have the required level of language competence. In this regard, it can be said that employers' demands and expectations are regrettably not met. Apart from the dissatisfaction it creates among employers, poor language command can reduce trainees' opportunities of employment and further learning.

The results have also shown that most of the trainees' lack even the basic vocabulary and expressions which otherwise are mandatory to do their major courses. While an in-depth study is required, the reason could well be insufficient use of English both in class and outside by the trainers and trainees.

The text book is one area which needs prompt consideration. It is never the kind of text book for these kinds of vocational training programmes. Until the text book is revised, teachers should use ancillary material to support their teaching.

Finally, in deed credibility of the education system is at stake. While the graduate profile states sets of activities trainees are capable of doing, actual performance, as witnessed in this study, particularly with regard to language competence is way below what is promised.

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