

# The Employability Skill Sets and Competencies of Graduates in Oman: The Employers' Perspective

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## Abstract

The study attempts to examine the factors that influence the employability skills and competencies of graduates in Oman in general with specific reference to the current period of the COVID 19 pandemic. The data, which is primary in nature, has been collected through a well-defined questionnaire. There are 74 responses representing government, private and quasi-governmental enterprises considered in the study. The samples consist of employers directly or indirectly belonging to the Oil and Gas sector constituting almost 45%, followed by the education sector constituting 15%. An analysis of descriptive statistics, Garrett's ranking technique, and multiple regression revealed that the size of the firms in terms of the number of employees and their level of education is positively associated. Further, small firms rely more on employees who are foreign-educated graduates than large firms do. Adaptability, computer skills, language skills such as reading and writing in English, planning, organizing, and decision-making skills, and team working skills are the most preferred skill sets required of graduates in the employment market during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic in Oman. Employers consider foreign-educated students more reliable with better skill sets required for employment than local graduates. Smaller firms tend to recruit a greater number of foreign-educated students than large firms do. The study reiterates that employers should offer their employees appropriate training opportunities in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic crisis that affects the very nature of employment, to enhance their perception about the scope of their roles and responsibilities in the unforeseen working environment and their ability to cope with the business risk.

**Keywords:** Higher Educational Institutions in Oman, Employability Skill sets and Competencies, COVID 19 Pandemic, and the period of the aftermath, Employers, Graduate Attributes.

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## 1. Introduction

Globalizations and the turbulence business environment facing today's business organizations led to adapting different strategies with coping this environment, where organizations are seeking to employ graduates who are ready and possess the employability skills to avoid training (Spencer, 2014). Employability skills, though defined by many scholars in various ways, are important for graduates to meet the present challenges in today's business environment that has been affected by the COVID 19 pandemic. Fundamentally, the employability skills refer to the characteristics of a graduate that make him/her successful in overcoming the challenges of the complex and challenging business environment where he/she decides to work. Employability can be defined as *a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy* (Yorke, 2006, cited in Tan and Laswad, 2019:212)

According to Hodges and Burchell (2003), employability skills refer to personal qualities rather than technical skills. Such non-technical skills that are transferable and indispensable for a graduate for getting a job and performing well are known as employability skills (Butum and Nicolescu, 2019; Erabaddage et al., 2015). The graduate employees must possess positive, proactive, and personal attributes; it is these rather than their technical soundness that would significantly contribute to the success of the business (Bhagra and Sharma, 2018; Thake, 2016; Su and Zhang, 2015; Nabi, 2003; Buck and Barrick, 1987).

The biggest handicap of business graduates around the world is the gap between the academic acquired skills and the skills and competencies expected of them in the job market. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to analyze the perceptions of employers recruiting graduate students in the broad field of business in the context of Oman.

## 2. Review of Literature

The literature review is divided into two parts. Part one explains the role of higher education institutions in making graduates employable. Part two illustrates the responsibility of employers in imparting employability skills and

competencies to the recruits.

One should accept that higher educational institutions face challenges in preparing their students to make them fit for employment in today's business environment. There has been a pervasive disorder around the world with lapses in the academic system while making students employable (Wilton, 2008; Sung et al., 2013; Abou-Setta, 2014; Tarvid, 2015). Holmes (2008), who has analyzed the employability skills of graduates in Egypt, has found that higher educational institutions invariably fail in their role to make their students employable. This is further supported by McCowan (2015) and Shivorov et al. (2017).

There has been a gap between the skills possessed and acquired by the graduates and the skills and competencies required by the employers. Therefore, employers should constantly contribute to the policy-making process of educational institutions to bridge this gap (Azevedo et al., 2012; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Poon, 2012; Warraich and Ameen, 2011; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2009; Roomi and Harrison, 2008). The changing economic and business environment lead to the introduction of new programs/ specializations, and in such new programs offerings, employers should assist the educational institutions to bring the required skill set in the curriculum development and this should be constantly monitored by the educational institutions at all levels before students graduate (Rae, 2008).

In contrast to the above findings, there are studies that recommend employers provide opportunities for the graduate recruits in the form of specific training, workshops, practical exposure, etc., to make the fresh graduates fit for their job market. Because the job specifications and skills required for such jobs are unique and usually unfamiliar to the graduates during their study, employers should provide a fair opportunity for their recruits to understand their roles and responsibilities in their jobs. According to Shaw and Fairhurst (2008), the human resource department of the recruiting organizations should examine the basic skills of the new graduates to identify any lapse and provide opportunities to overcome it. Employers should work closely with Universities and Colleges and provide them with vital information about the changing environment of business needs and contribute to the curriculum development for acquiring the required skills among the graduates. Employers must also participate in the process of making the graduates employable (Cai, 2013 and Tran, 2015). McDonnell and O'Neill (2009) and McIlveen and Pensiero (2008) argue that the success of a graduate is due to the results of the joint efforts of both the educational institutions and the employers considering the pressing needs of the employment market.

Suarta et al. (2017) have examined the literature review on the employability skills of graduates from the employers' perspective. They concluded that skills relating to communication, problem-solving and decision-making, and teamwork are the most important skills employers expect their recruits to possess. They have also identified that graduates should have soft skills like self-awareness, self-confidence, independence, emotional intelligence, flexibility and adaptability, stress tolerance, creativity, and initiative, willingness to learn, reflectiveness, lifelong learning, and professional behavior. Atanasovski et al. (2018) concluded that generic skills are ranked highly when employers are recruiting graduates than technical skills, and generic skills that were valued were oral communication, ethical attitude and credibility, and commitment to lifelong learning.

Lim et (2016) indicated that the surveyed employers valued communication skills, analytical skills, and time management were the most ranked employability skills. Bunney et al. (2015) and Webb and Chaffer (2016) have reported similar results where generic skills were rated highly, where Sing et al. (2014), Sin et al. (2016) believed that generic skills will increase graduate chances of for employability. Su and Zhang (2015) supported this further through their study in China and recommended that personal attribute, professional ability, communication skills, and problem-solving ability were rated among the top skills needed for employability. In addition to this, Mohamad et al. (2018) concluded that the most highly appreciated employability skills in Malaysia were time management and social responsibility while personal and interpersonal skills were the most frequently highlighted for recruitment in Australia and New Zealand (Tan and Laswad, 2019).

According to Think Global and the British Council (2011), graduating students should not only possess knowledge in their technical subject/discipline but also a wide, up-to-date worldly awareness. According to the American Management Association (2010), prominent employability skills are critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, collaboration, and communication skills. Suarta, I.M. (2010) in his study has identified workplace health and safety, self-management, teamwork, technology, and problem-solving to be the essential qualities of graduates seeking jobs. In addition to these skills, a further study conducted in Saudi Arabi which identified critical thinking, decision making, oral communication, teamwork, business ethics, time management negotiation skills, technological skills, leadership were highly rated by employers as employability attributes (Zureigat, 2015).

A study conducted by the University of Glasgow in 2011 concluded that graduates should have learned and been evaluated on their abilities relating to teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, and management. However, a considerable percentage of higher educational institutions fail to concentrate on developing the soft skills of their students. Even students from reputed institutions, to the dismay of recruiters, fail to meet their expectations. The most important outcome of the research is that Universities and Colleges do not have a systematic evaluation process of soft skills at different levels. It seems that the lack of an

effective system in place for promoting the employability skills at Colleges and Universities is the fundamental reason why graduates fail to find the right job. The study suggests that institutions should offer enough placement opportunities, follow up measures, and internships for students in their final year of study to help them develop employability skills. The research also finds that some academic departments in Universities and Colleges perceive that their success lies in the academic proficiency of the students, which is measured in terms of grades. They are reluctant to focus on the development of soft skills among the students.

A graduate is successful due to many factors, student academic stand is an indicator in measuring student success in the job market. The educational institutions should analyze not only the factors influencing the students' academic performance but also the factors affecting their employability (Blasko et al., 2002; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; and Smetherham, 2006). Shahrudin (2004) who has examined the employability skills of graduates in Malaysia, has found that even the students who have fared well academically lack the required soft skills. The same was proved by Dickinson in 2000. The study findings indicated that the lack of personal attributes is a common weakness of graduates seeking jobs in the UK. The same is acknowledged by Lawrence (2002) who studied the employability skills of the graduates in America.

The review of literature certainly reveals that the poor performance of graduates in the job market is attributable to two main factors. The first is the lack of a systematic plan of teaching soft skills and evaluating the students' ability to excel in such skills. The second is the employers' contributions towards imparting the necessary skills. Most of the studies reviewed are related to developed countries like the USA, the UK, Malaysia, etc. However, the exposure provided by higher educational institutions in Middle Eastern countries, especially in Oman, is quite different from that by western Universities and Colleges. Therefore, there is a need for such a study in Oman to identify the possible reasons for graduates from Universities and Colleges in Oman faring badly in the job market. There has been no extensive research study performed on the employability skills and competencies of the graduates in Oman. The government of Oman is urging higher educational institutions and employers to concentrate on the employability skills of graduates considering future challenges (Times of Oman, December 26, 2016). Thus, considering the challenging job market conditions owing to the COVID 19 pandemic, the present study is considered inevitable for contributing to the success of the student body in Oman even after their graduation.

Students pursuing business studies in Oman have several specializations such as business administration, accounting, marketing, human resources, organizational behavior, management information systems, aviation and airport, logistics, commercial law, etc., which are offered in both Arabic and English medium. However, when the students go to the employment market, they are expected to possess the basic graduate attributes which include technical and soft skills. The collegiate education in Oman finds students' knowledge and skills in their chosen field of study—the technical competencies—adequate. However, there is no direct mechanism followed by higher educational institutions to consistently measure the personal employability skills possessed by the students at different levels such as freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior levels.

Therefore, the present study was undertaken in Oman with an attempt to find solutions to questions such as:

- *Do the graduates of Oman have different facets of employability skills?*
- *Do the educational institutions build employability skills and the personal competencies required for the graduates?*
- *What types of soft skills are expected by the industry due to the changing business environment?*

The expected outcome of the research would help educational institutions to formalize an academic system to consistently monitor the personal attributes of the students and ensure that the graduating students possess the necessary attributes when they graduate.

### **3. Research Objectives**

An earnest endeavor has been made in this study to find solutions to the questions raised above. Accordingly, the following objectives have been framed:

- a. To analyze the factors attributable to the effectiveness of the Graduates' employability skills and competencies.
- b. To examine the employers' awareness of the employability skills and competencies of graduates.
- c. To find out the effectiveness of the employers' contribution to higher educational institutions for imparting employability skills and competencies.
- d. To provide suggestions and recommendations to both employers and higher educational institutions to fill the gap between the skills and competencies among business students.

### **4. Research Methodology**

A descriptive research design is adopted for the study to do a fact-finding investigation with relevant data analysis and interpretation. An honest attempt is made in this study to analyze the perceptions of firms recruiting graduates in Oman. Business firms were selected based on the condition that the firms are registered in Oman and had

recruited the graduates during the last five years. Primary data was collected from the employees of the firms by distributing a well-designed questionnaire after a pilot study.

**4.1 Study Context:** The Impact of the COVID 19 pandemic which has challenged the whole world is immensely felt invariably in all sectors of the global economy during 2020 and 2021. Therefore, a need arises for academicians to extend their contributions by undertaking research and openly sharing such research results to combat the COVID 19 illness sustained by the economy. The educational sector which is also under the clutches of COVID 19 has been affected to an extent where the pandemic leads to the near closure of some institutions. UNESCO reports that approximately 825 million students were affected by the COVID 19 due to the closure of educational institutions (<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>). In view of this, the present has been undertaken to contribute to the efforts of defeating the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic in Oman.

When it comes to Oman, the effect of the global shutdown due to the COVID 19 pandemic and the falling oil prices have had a devastating effect on Oman's economy. Though the government of Oman has already initiated measures to diversify the economy away from oil, the effect is immensely felt. The government of Oman is hoping to create a resilient graduate employee groups in Oman to explore innovative ideas such as self-entrepreneurship, the establishment of SMEs, etc., to reach a non-oil-based economy, in the long run, to combat such difficult situations in the future. Thus, the study is undertaken in Oman with the aim of strengthening the skills and competencies of graduate students of higher education, as an alternative movement, for contributing to the efforts of defeating the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic and declining oil prices.

**4.2 Sample Frame:** The enterprises from the government, private and quasi-government sectors in Oman who recruit graduate students from the population for the study. Simple random sampling technique adopted for the study has helped to reach 74 firms operating in Oman. The study uses a structured questionnaire for collecting data from the Managers/ HD directors who are at the managerial positions and in charge of the recruitment of human resources for their organizations. The questionnaire has been reviewed by academicians and experts in the industry. Based on their recommendations, a few modifications have also been implemented and finalized. Additionally, the questionnaire was also reviewed the research and ethics committee at our college and a few recommendations were offered and they were incorporated in the revised copy of the questionnaire. Furthermore, a pilot study was made to examine the feasibility of collecting the required information from the respondents. For this purpose, the researcher has interacted with select managers of private firms in Muscat. Based on their suggestions, modifications have been made on the language of the questions to make the respondents more comfortable while answering the questions. A pre-test was undertaken to examine the clarity of the questionnaire with 10 respondents.

**4.3 Ethical considerations:** The questionnaire, after being finalized technically, went through the Ethics Committee at Modern College of Business and Science [MCBS] to obtain the ethical validation. Then, the questionnaire was finalized and adopted for collecting data. The finalized questionnaire was converted into Google forms and sent to various organizations requesting them to complete the form. The study has managed to obtain 74 responses.

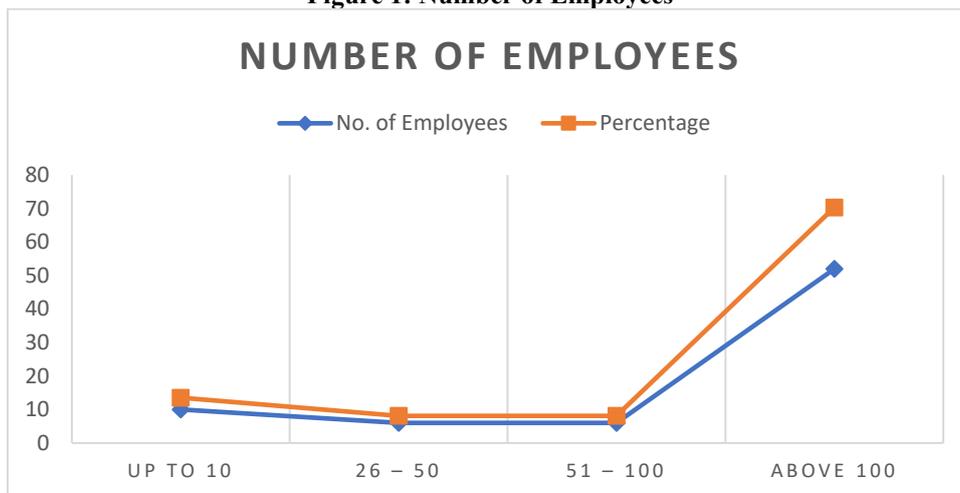
**4.4 Data Analysis:** The statistical tools used to analyze the data include (i) Simple percentage (ii) Garrett's Ranking Technique and (iii) and Multiple Regression.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The data collected through the questionnaire are analyzed using (A) Simple percentage, (B) Garrett's Ranking Technique, (C) Regression analysis and Chi-square analysis. The results are summarized as follows:

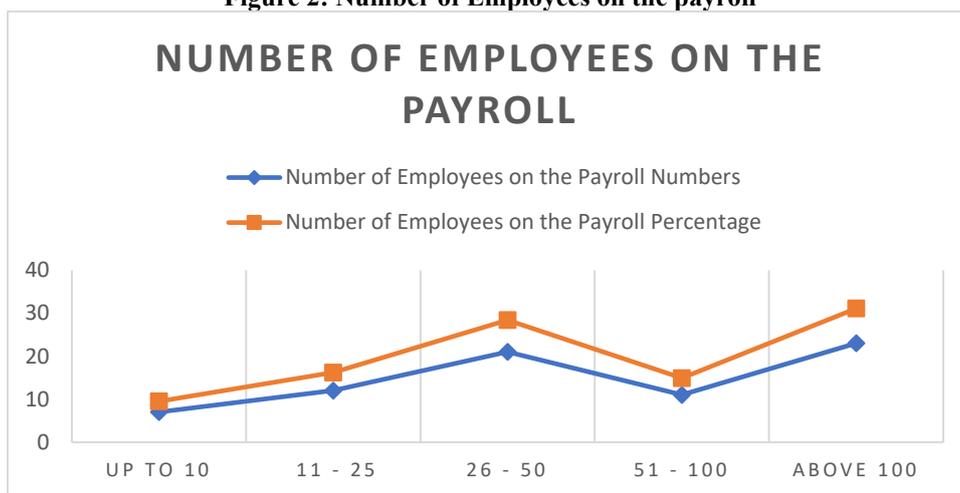
- A. Simple Percentage:** The nature of the data collected is analyzed using simple percentage. The results are as follows:
- (a) The number of employers:** Figure 1 reveals that close to 70% of the samples consist of employers who have more than 100 employees and 13.5% less than 10 employees. Therefore, the study is based on a representative sample that confirms the reliability of data which forms a base for generalizing the results to the whole country.

**Figure 1: Number of Employees**



**(b) The number of employees on the payroll:** The results indicate that close to 31% of the employees who have responded to the questionnaires are from the employers' group comprising more than 100 employees on the payroll, followed by 28.4% of the employees from the firms having employees numbering between 26 and 50 (see Figure 2). This confirms that the study focuses on employers who have employed a relatively significant number of employees.

**Figure 2: Number of Employees on the payroll**



**(c) Need for new recruitment:** Figure 3 explains the need for the new recruitment of employees at all levels. Employers having less than 10 employees seem to hire more even during the period of COVID 19 pandemic, followed by employers with 26 to 50, 51 to 100, and above 100 employees.

**Figure 3: Recruitment Plan**



**(d) Employers' ownership structure:** The sample shows that approximately 68% of the employers are from the private sector, 19% from the public sector owned by the Government, and 13.5% from semi-governmental

enterprises (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Ownership Structure**

Ownership Structure	Numbers	Percentage
Public / Government	14	18.9
Private	50	67.6
Semi-government	10	13.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>

(e) **The nature of the business of employers:** The sample consists of employers directly or indirectly connected to the Oil and Gas sector constituting almost 45%, followed by the Education sector with 15 percent. Employers representing the other sectors comprise 40% collectively. The lowest representation is 4.1% from the manufacturing sector, Electricity and water supply, Banking and financial services, Information technology, Automobile and Export, and Import (see table 2).

**Table 2: Nature of Business**

Nature of Business	Number of Employers	Percentage
Manufacturing	3	4.1
Oil and Gas	33	44.6
Electricity & Water Supply	3	4.1
Education	11	14.9
Banking & Financial Services	3	4.1
Transportation, Hotel	4	5.4
Information Technology	3	4.1
Automobile	3	4.1
Real Estate	4	5.4
Export & Import	3	4.1
Waste Management	4	5.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(f) **Source of data collection from employers:** Close to 64% of the source of data is the managers who are currently handling the human resource department of their firms (see table 3). So, the data obtained is highly reliable and one can believe that the opinions of those managers represent exactly what is happening with the human resources management in the employment sector, both governmental and private in the country.

**Table 3: Survey Participants**

Data Source	Numbers	Percentage
Manager	31	41.9
HR Director / HR Manager	16	21.6
Others	27	36.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(g) **The composition of graduate employees:** Table 4 illustrates the composition of employees in terms of their educational level. The employers employing between 61 and 70 have a higher number of graduate employees and a lower number of postgraduate employees. Employers with 11-20 employees have more postgraduate employees than graduate employees. There is a direct relationship found between the size of the firm in terms of the number of employees and their level of education (Tansel et al.2013).

**Table 4: Composition of Graduate Employees**

Employees' Range	No of Employers with Undergraduates Employees	Percentage	No of Postgraduate Employees	Percentage
Less than 10	6	8.1	10	13.5
11 – 20	6	8.1	35	47.3
21 – 30	14	18.9	3	4.1
31 – 40	4	5.4	8	10.8
41 – 50	3	4.1	3	4.1
61 – 70	15	20.3	4	5.4
71 – 80	4	5.4	3	4.1
81 – 90	3	4.1		
91 – 100	19	25.7	8	10.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(h) **Skills and competencies-- Employers' Priority:** The study reveals that almost 39% of the employers have preferred employees based on Language Skill- Reading and Writing in English, Computer skills, Analytical and problem-solving skills, Planning, organizing and decision-making skills, Team working skills (see table 5). A

detailed rank analysis is done with Garrett’s Ranking Technique.

**(i) Skills and competencies- employers’ priority during the period of COVID 19 pandemic:** The study also takes into consideration the priority metrics from the employers’ viewpoint. The results reveal that the Adaptability, Computer skills, Language Skill- Reading and Writing in English, Planning, organizing and decision-making skills, and Team working skills are the most preferred skill set required of the employees in the employment market during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic (see table 6).

**Table 5: Skills and Competencies preferences**

<b>Skills and Competencies Metrics Priority</b>		
<b>Skills and Competencies Metrics</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
A. Numerical ability	29	6
B. Reading/writing skills	32	7
C. Language skills - Reading and Writing in Arabic	29	6
D. Language Skill- Reading and Writing in English	60	13
E. Computer skills	66	14
F. Knowledge on business affairs in Oman	26	5
G. Analytical and problem-solving skills	61	13
H. Adaptability	44	9
I. Planning, organizing, and decision-making skills	61	13
J. Team working skills	67	14
Total Responses from 74 Employers	475	100

**Table 6: Skills and Competencies Preferences During COVID 19**

<b>Skills and Competencies Metrics Priority During COVID 19 Pandemic</b>		
<b>Skills and Competencies Metrics</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
A. Numerical ability	18	5
B. Reading/writing skills	16	5
C. Language skills - Reading and Writing in Arabic	18	5
D. Language Skill- Reading and Writing in English	42	12
E. Computer skills	56	16
F. Knowledge on business affairs in Oman	23	7
G. Analytical and problem-solving skills	32	9
H. Adaptability	58	16
I. Planning, organizing, and decision-making skills	48	14
J. Team working skills	41	12
Total Responses from 74 Employers	352	100

**(j) Training prospects for employees:** The following tables (7, 8, 9 and Figure 4)) and Chart explain the training opportunities availed of by the employees during the last 5 years. All the employers have offered training facilities to their employees, based on the nature of their employment and the future endeavors of the business expansions. The average number of training programs is 2 to 5 times a year. One can understand that the employees of small firms have experienced more opportunities for training, compared to those of large firms in Oman.

**Table 7: Graduate Employees Training**

<b>Training for Graduate Employees</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	74	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 8: Number of Training Programs Offered**

<b>Number of Training Programs Offered</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Less than 2	30	40.5
2 – 5	25	33.8
Above 5	19	25.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 9: Employees Trained Vs Organizational Size**

Employers' Range	Number of Employees Trained	Percentage
Less than 10 Employees	41	55.4
10 – 50	21	28.4
More than 50	12	16.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Figure 4: Training Opportunities**



**(k) Implications of foreign-educated employees:** Employers constituting 45% from two groups having 5-10 and 21-30 employees have recruited the greatest number of employees with a foreign degree (see table 10 and 11). The employers representing 44% invariably consider that the students who have graduated abroad would have better skills and competencies than local graduates. 19% of the small firms have recruited a greater number of employees with degrees from foreign universities as against large firms with 11 percent of such employees.

**Table 10: Number of Foreign educated employees**

Percentage of employers with a greater number of foreign-educated employees		
Employers' Range	Numbers	Percentage
Less than 5	14	18.9
5 – 10	22	29.7
11-20	7	9.5
21 – 30	23	31.1
More than 50	8	10.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 11: Reasons for recruiting foreign educated students**

Reason for recruiting foreign-educated students		
Reason for recruiting foreign-educated students	Numbers	Percentage
To recruit the very best talent available	10	13.5
Need to have an international workforce	10	13.5
Insufficient candidates graduated on Oman with Right Skills	10	13.5
Graduates from other countries have strong skills and competencies than candidates graduate in Oman	44	59.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>

**(l) Employers' contribution to academic institutions:** 76% of employers offer research assistance to students and educational institutions and internship opportunities to the students. 24% of the employers extend their support to the participation of students in debates or seminars organized by higher education institutions, and personal discussions with study program directors or teachers.

**Table 12: Community Engagement**

Industry's participation in academic affairs	Number of employers	Percentage
Participation in debates or seminars organized by higher education institutions	6	8.1
Personal discussions with study program directors or teachers	12	16.2
Participating in the research activities of the educational Institutions	27	36.5
Providing internship opportunities to the students	29	39.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**B. Analysis of the results of Garrett's Ranking Technique**

Garrett's Ranking Technique has been used to ascertain the employers' preferences for recruiting graduate employees based on their skills and competencies. Under the Garrett's ranking technique, the percentage position is calculated by using the following formula:

$$c. \text{ Percentage Position} = 100 (R_{ij} - 0.5) / N_j$$

D. Where  $R_{ij}$  = Rank given for  $i^{\text{th}}$  variable by the  $j^{\text{th}}$  employers.

E.  $N_j$  = Number of variables ranked by employers

The employers were asked to rank the metrics denoting the skills and competencies of employees that are considered during their recruitment process. With reference to the Garrett Table below (see Table 13), the percent position is converted into scores. Then for each metric, the scores of each employer are added and then the mean value is calculated. The factors having the highest mean value is the most important metric.

**a. Employers' preference during graduate recruitment:**

Scale values as per Garrett Ranking Technique for first to eight ranks are 79, 67, 59, 53, 46, 40, 32, and 20 respectively. The percentage position of each rank is made into a score by referring to the factors summed up for assigning the rank. The following table shows the employers' graduate preference during recruitment. From the analysis, it is inferred that most of the employers prefer students who are well-versed in Business Administration followed by Accounting & Finance, Marketing, etc.

**(b) Factors considered for recruitment during the period of COVID 19 pandemic:** Garrett's Ranking Technique has been used to ascertain the factors considered by the employers for recruitment during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic. Under the Garrett's ranking technique, the percentage position is calculated by using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage Position} = 100 (R_{ij} - 0.5) / N_j$$

Where  $R_{ij}$  = Rank given for  $i^{\text{th}}$  variable by the  $j^{\text{th}}$  employers.

$N_j$  = Number of variables ranked by employers

**Table 13: Employers' preferences for recruiting graduate employees**

Particulars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
	79	67	59	53	46	40	32	20				
Business Administration	45	10	5	5	4	3	1	1	74	5141	69.47	1
Organizational Behavior	36	7	5	2	7	4	4	9	74	4504	60.86	5
Marketing	41	9	5	3	4	5	4	3	74	4868	65.78	3
Accounting & Finance	43	11	5	8	3	2	1	1	74	5123	69.23	2
Transportation & Logistics	30	3	5	8	9	10	2	7	74	4308	58.22	7
Airport & Aviation	29	5	4	5	3	13	10	5	74	4205	56.82	8
Commercial Law	33	5	4	3	8	6	8	7	74	4341	58.66	6
Management Information System	38	8	3	5	4	3	3	10	74	4580	61.89	4

The employers are asked to rank the seven variables relating to the skills and competencies metrics considered by employers during the COVID 19 Pandemic period. Scale values as per Garrett ranking technique for first to seven ranks are 78, 65, 57, 50, 42, 34, and 21 respectively. The percentage position of each rank is made into a score by referring to factors summed up for assigning the rank. Table 14 shows the factors considered by the employers for recruitment during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic. The result of Garrett Ranking discloses that anticipated growth in business, cost control, Quality of the employees' service, etc. are the factors considered

by the employers during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic.

**Table 14: Factors considered for recruitment during COVID19 pandemic**

Particulars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
	78	65	57	50	42	34	21				
Anticipated growth in business	44	11	8	5	3	2	1	74	5068	68.49	1
	3432	715	456	250	126	68	21				
Actual growth in business	38	12	6	5	7	4	2	74	4808	64.97	4
	2964	780	342	250	294	136	42				
Increasing complexity of tasks	36	9	8	10	5	3	3	74	4724	63.84	5
	2808	585	456	500	210	102	63				
Higher number of applicants	33	5	8	9	10	4	5	74	4466	60.35	6
	2574	325	456	450	420	136	105				
Cost Control	41	12	4	5	7	3	2	74	4894	66.14	2
	3198	780	228	250	294	102	42				
Customer Preference	29	9	8	8	7	7	6	74	4361	58.93	7
	2262	585	456	400	294	238	126				
Quality of the service of the employees	40	11	5	6	8	2	2	74	4866	65.76	3
	3120	715	285	300	336	68	42				

**(c) Employers' priority during the recruitment:** The results of the Garrett's Ranking Technique ascertain the employers' priority during recruitment. Under the Garrett's ranking technique, the percentage position is calculated by using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage Position} = 100 (R_{ij} - 0.5) / N_j$$

Where  $R_{ij}$  = Rank given for  $i^{\text{th}}$  variable by the  $j^{\text{th}}$  employers.  
 $N_j$  = Number of variables ranked by employers

The employers are asked to rank the seven questions relating to recruitment based on priority. Scale values as per Garrett ranking technique for first to seven ranks are 78, 65, 57, 50, 42, 34, and 21 respectively. The percentage position of each rank is made into a score by referring to factors summed up for assigning the rank. Table 15 shows the priority considered by employers during recruitment. The result of Garrett Ranking portrays that proactive, enthusiastic fresh graduates, Omanization, work ethics are the priority factors considered by employers during recruitment.

**(d) Challenges during the recruitment:** Under the Garrett's ranking technique, the percentage position is calculated by using the following formula, to ascertain the impact of challenges faced by the employers during recruitment.

$$\text{Percentage Position} = 100 (R_{ij} - 0.5) / N_j$$

Where  $R_{ij}$  = Rank given for  $i^{\text{th}}$  variable by the  $j^{\text{th}}$  employers.  
 $N_j$  = Number of variables ranked by employers

The employers are asked to rank the four questions relating to challenges faced by them during recruitment. Scale values as per Garrett ranking technique for first to four ranks are 72, 56, 43, and 27 respectively. The percentage position of each rank is made into a score by referring to factors summed up for assigning the rank. Table 16 shows the challenges faced by employers during recruitment. The results disclose that a shortage of applicants with the right skills and capabilities in Oman, the inability to notify the vacancies, an ineffective hiring process, and the inability to offer competitive salaries are the problems faced by employers during recruitment.

**Table 15: Employability Skills Preferences**

Particulars	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
	78	65	57	50	42	34	21				
Prior work experience in the relevant field	34	12	3	6	5	8	6	74	4511	60.96	5
New proactive, enthusiastic fresh graduates	45	12	8	3	1	2	3	74	5069	68.50	1
Recruitment based on Recommendation	28	11	5	4	9	8	9	74	4223	57.07	7
Omanization	41	8	8	9	5	2	1	74	4923	66.53	2
Good academic ranking	31	14	5	6	6	7	5	74	4508	60.92	6
Work Ethics	38	12	5	4	8	2	5	74	4738	64.03	3
Reputation of the academic institution of the graduates	37	8	9	5	6	5	4	74	4675	63.18	4

**Table 16: Challenges Faced by Employers during Recruitment**

Particulars	1	2	3	4	Total	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
	72	56	43	27				
Shortage of applicants with the right skills and capabilities in Oman	48	19	5	2	74	4789	64.72	1
Not able to advertise the vacancies	43	15	9	7	74	4512	60.97	2
Ineffective hiring process	38	16	9	11	74	4316	58.32	3
Not able to offer competitive salary	29	20	10	15	74	4043	54.64	4

**(e) Method of improving employability skills during the period of COVID 19 pandemic and the aftermath:** Garrett's Ranking Technique has been used to ascertain the method by which Colleges and Universities may improve students' employability skills during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic. Under the Garrett's ranking technique, the percentage position is calculated by using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage Position} = 100 (R_{ij} - 0.5) / N_j$$

Where  $R_{ij}$  = Rank given for  $i^{\text{th}}$  variable by the  $j^{\text{th}}$  employers.

$N_j$  = Number of variables ranked by employers

The employers are asked to rank the five questions relating to the method by which Colleges and Universities may improve students' employability skills during the period of the COVID 19. Scale values as per Garrett ranking technique for first to five ranks are 75, 60, 50, 39, and 24 respectively. The percentage position of each rank is made into a score by referring to factors summed up for assigning the rank. Table 17 shows the methods by which Colleges and Universities may improve students' employability skills during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic and the aftermath. The test results show that creating awareness among the students on the graduate attributes that they should possess by the time they graduate, making them more self-reliant, providing entrepreneurial skills, etc. are the methods that may be adopted by the Colleges and Universities for improving students' employability skills during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic and the aftermath.

**Table 17: Employment Skills Improvement Approaches**

Particulars	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Total Score	Mean Score	Rank
	75	60	50	39	24				
Create awareness among the students on the graduate attributes that they should possess by the time when they graduate	48	19	4	2	1	74	5042	68.14	1
	3600	1140	200	78	24				
Make the students more self-reliant	46	18	3	2	5	74	4878	65.92	2
	3450	1080	150	78	120				
Providing entrepreneurial skills	38	18	5	7	6	74	4597	62.12	3
	2850	1080	250	273	144				
Design courses which are more relevant to the needs of employers	32	21	6	9	6	74	4455	60.20	4
	2400	1260	300	351	144				
Include practical training in courses	29	16	19	7	3	74	4430	59.86	5
	2175	960	950	273	72				

**C. Regression Analysis**

The impact of the variables that determine the employees' skill sets is examined with the running regression analysis (table 18). The following regression equation has been framed to ascertain the impact of variables determining employees' skill sets.

$$ESS = a + b_1 COE + b_2 PUGE + b_3 PPGE + b_4 NTPO + e$$

where,

- ESS = Employees Skill Sets
- a = Intercept Term
- b<sub>1</sub>...b<sub>4</sub> = Regression Coefficients
- COE = Category of Ownership
- PUGE = % of Undergraduate Employees
- PPGE = % of Postgraduate Employees
- NTPO = Number of Training Programs Organized
- e = Error Term

In reference to the employee skill sets, table 18 revealed that the percentage of graduate employees and employees' skill sets are positively related. Employability skill sets are positively influenced by their graduate level of education. Graduate employees show a better level of understanding in their employment position while performing their assigned tasks. The percentage of postgraduate employees and employees' skill sets are positively related. Postgraduate employees also show a higher level of understanding leading to an efficient way of handling the tasks assigned. The number of Training Programs Organized and employees' skill sets are positively related. Organizing a greater number of training programs by the organization improves employees' skill sets. In reference to the impact of the model, the value of R<sup>2</sup> is found to be significant at one per cent level. This shows that the regression equation framed is a good fit. Around 18.50% of the variation in employee skill sets is due to the select variables.

**Table 18: Multiple Regression Analysis - Determinants of Employee Skill Sets**

Variables	Regression coefficient	Standard error	t	Sig
Category of Ownership	0.961	0.583	1.648	0.100
% of Undergraduate Employees	1.179*	0.563	2.096	0.037
% of Post Graduate Employees	1.651**	0.459	3.595	0.000
Number of Training Programs Organized	3.017**	0.474	6.364	0.000

\* Significant at five per cent level \*\* Significant at one per cent level

Constant :88.119

Std. Error of Estimate : 7.901

R<sup>2</sup> : 0.163

R<sup>2</sup> : 0.185\*\*

**Categories of employers and the importance of employees' skills and competencies**

In identifying the variables that determine employers' importance towards the metrics of employees' skills and competencies, regression analysis is employed. The following regression equation is framed to ascertain the most influential variables determining employees' skill sets.

$$ESC = a + b_1 COE + b_2 PUGE + b_3 PPGE + e$$

where,

- ESC = Employees Skill and Competencies
- a = Intercept Term

- $b_1...b_4$  = Regression Coefficients
- COE = Category of Ownership
- PUGE = % of Undergraduate Employees
- PPGE = % of Postgraduate Employees
- e = Error Term

**Table 19: Multiple Regression Analysis - Importance towards skills and competencies**

Variables	Regression coefficient	Standard error	t	Sig
Category of Ownership	-0.294**	0.084	-3.517	0.001
% of Undergraduate Employees	0.085**	0.018	4.660	0.000
% of Postgraduate Employees	0.112**	0.020	5.633	0.000
* Significant at five per cent level				
** Significant at one per cent level				

Constant :4.178  
 Std. Error of Estimate : 0.167  
 $R^2$  : 0.403  
 $R^2$  : 0.428\*\*

In reference to the importance towards skills and competencies, table 19 indicated that the category of ownership and importance towards employees' skills and competencies are negatively related. Public/Government-owned organizations give much more importance towards employees' skills and competencies during recruitment than other forms of enterprises do. The percentage of graduate employees and employees' skills and competencies are positively related. Employers attach a significant level of importance to qualified graduate employees. Employers give a high-level of priority to postgraduate employees in the recruitment process. Regarding the impact of the model, the value of  $R^2$  is found to be significant at one per cent level. This shows that the regression equation framed is a good fit. Around 42.80% of the variation in employees' skills and competencies is due to the select variables.

**Determinants of employers' satisfaction**

The following regression equation is framed to ascertain the impact of the variables on Employers' Satisfaction.

$$ES = a + b_1 NOE + b_2 NOEFY + b_3 CO + b_4 NOB + b_5 PUGE + b_6 PPGE + b_7 ERSS + b_8 EPTP + e$$

where,

- ES = Employers' Satisfaction
- a = Intercept Term
- $b_1...b_8$  = Regression Coefficients
- NOE = No. of Employees
- NOEFY = No. of Employees recruited during past five years
- CO = Category of Ownership
- NOB = Nature of Business
- PUGE = % of Undergraduate Employees
- PPGE = % of Postgraduate Employees
- ERSS = Employees with required skill sets
- EPTP = % of Employees participated in Training Programs
- e = Error Term

**Table 20: Multiple Regression Analysis - Determinants of employers' satisfaction**

Variables	Regression coefficient	Standard error	t	Sig
No. of Employees	-0.195	0.137	-1.428	0.158
No. of Employees recruited during past five years	0.087	0.099	0.879	0.383
Category of Ownership	-0.187	0.142	-1.312	0.194
Nature of Business	-0.008	0.027	-0.290	0.772
% of Undergraduate Employees	-0.051	0.037	-1.376	0.174
% of Postgraduate Employees	0.128**	0.027	4.713	0.000
Employees with required skill sets	0.251*	0.105	2.400	0.019
% of Employees participated in Training Programs	-0.241	0.142	-1.692	0.096
* Significant at five per cent level				
** Significant at one per cent level				

Constant :3.596  
 Std. Error of Estimate : 0.820  
 $R^2$  : 0.336  
 $R^2$  : 0.408\*\*

In reviewing Table 20, it was highlighted that the percentage of postgraduate employees and employers' satisfaction are positively related. Employers who recruit a greater number of postgraduate students have a high level of satisfaction. Moreover, employees with the required skill sets and employers' satisfaction are positively related. Employers who perceive that their employees possess the required skill sets for carrying out their tasks have a high level of satisfaction. In reference to the impact of the model, the value of  $R^2$  is found to be significant at one per cent level. This shows that the regression equation framed is a good fit. Around 40.80% of the variation in the level of employers' satisfaction is due to the select variables.

#### D. Chi-square Analysis

##### I. Variables associated with employees' skill sets and competencies

Chi-square analysis was performed to identify the variables associated with employees' skill sets and competencies, the results are summarized below in different categories:

**a. Ownership categories:** To identify whether there exists any association between ownership categories and employees' skill sets and competencies, the following hypothesis has been framed and tested.

*H<sub>0</sub>: Category of ownership is not associated with employees' skill sets and competencies*

**Table 21: Ownership Categories**

Category of Ownership	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Public / Government	4	4	6	14
	(28.6)	(28.6)	(42.9)	(100.0)
Private	0	21	29	50
	(0.0)	(42.0)	(58.0)	(100.0)
Semi-government	0	10	0	10
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:4</b>	<b>Chi-square: 30.349</b>	<b>P-value: .000</b>	<b>Significant</b>	

Table 21 indicated that the Public/Government sector employers have disagreed that employees recruited during the past five years possess the required skill sets and competencies. However, semi-Government employers have confirmed that their employees recruited during the past five years possess the required skill sets and competencies and private sector employers strongly agree that their employees recruited during the past five years possess the required skill sets and competencies. As the calculated P-value is less than 0.01, which suggests that there exists a highly significant association between ownership categories and employees' skill sets and competencies. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.

**b. Percentage of graduate employees:** To find whether there exists any association between the percentage of undergraduate employees and employee's skill sets, the following hypothesis has been framed and tested.

*H<sub>0</sub>: percentage of undergraduate employees employed is not associated with employees' skill sets and competencies*

One can understand from Table 22 that the calculated P-value is less than 0.01 which indicates that there exists a highly significant association between the percentage of graduate employees and their skill sets and competencies. So, the results reject the null hypothesis.

**Table 22: Percentage of Graduate Employees**

% of Graduate Employees	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Less than 10	0	0	6	6
	(0.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
11 – 20	0	0	6	6
	(0.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
21 – 30	0	10	4	14
	(0.0)	(71.4)	(28.6)	(100.0)
31 – 40	4	0	0	4
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
41 – 50	0	0	3	3
	(0.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
61 – 70	0	3	12	15
	(0.0)	(20.0)	(80.0)	(100.0)
71 – 80	0	4	0	4
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
81 – 90	0	3	0	3
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
91 – 100	0	15	4	19
	(0.0)	(78.9)	(21.1)	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:16</b>	<b>Chi-square: 112.416</b>	<b>P-value: .000</b>	<b>Significant</b>	

c. **Percentage of postgraduate employees:** To assess the strength of the association between the percentage of postgraduate employees recruited and the employees' skill sets and competencies, the following hypothesis has been framed and tested.

*H<sub>0</sub>: percentage of postgraduate employees employed is not associated with their skill sets and competencies*

The calculated P-value is less than 0.01 as highlighted in table 23 which shows that there exists a highly significant association between the percentage of postgraduate employees of the firms and their skill sets and competencies. So, the null hypothesis is rejected.

d. **Number of training programs offered:** The association between the number of training programs offered for employees and the employees' skill sets and competencies is tested with the following null hypothesis.

*H<sub>0</sub>: The number of training programs offered is not associated with employee's skill sets and competencies*

**Table 23: Percentage of postgraduate employees**

% of Post Graduate Employees	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Less than 10	0	7	3	10
	(0.0)	(70.0)	(30.0)	(100.0)
11 – 20	4	6	25	35
	(11.4)	(17.1)	(71.4)	(100.0)
21 – 30	0	3	0	3
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
31 – 40	0	4	4	8
	(0.0)	(50.0)	(50.0)	(100.0)
51 – 60	0	0	3	3
	(0.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
61 – 70	0	4	0	4
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
71 – 80	0	3	0	3
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
91 – 100	0	8	0	8
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:14</b>	<b>Chi-square: 39.507</b>	<b>P-value: .000</b>	<b>Significant</b>	

**Table 24: Number of training programs offered**

Number of Training Programs Offered	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Less than 2	0	14	16	30
	(0.0)	(46.7)	(53.3)	(100.0)
2 – 5	4	14	7	25
	(16.0)	(56.0)	(28.0)	(100.0)
Above 5	0	7	12	19
	(0.0)	(36.8)	(63.2)	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:4</b>	<b>Chi-square: 11.892</b>	<b>P-value: .000</b>	<b>Significant</b>	

Employees were able to enhance their skills and competencies when their employers offer more training programs for them as highlighted in table 24. Table 24 indicated the calculated P-value which was less than 0.01 and suggested that there exists a highly significant association between the number of training programs organized and employee's skill sets. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.

**II. Chi-square Analysis: Variables associated with employers' importance towards employees' skill sets and competencies**

**a. Category of ownership:** To observe if there exists any association between the category of ownership and employers' importance towards employees' skill sets and competencies, the following hypothesis has been framed and tested.

*H<sub>0</sub>: Category of ownership is not associated with employers' priority towards employee's skill sets and competencies*

**Table 25: Category of ownership**

Category of Ownership	Important	Very Important	Total
Public / Government	4	10	14
	(28.6)	(71.4)	(100.0)
Private	23	27	50
	(46.0)	(54.0)	(100.0)
Semi-government	10	0	10
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:2</b>	<b>Chi-square: 12.891</b>	<b>P-value: .002</b>	<b>Significant</b>

From the calculated P-value in table 25, which is less than 0.01, all employers regardless of their ownership structure consider the skills and competencies of their employees as an integral part of the success of their businesses.

**b. Percentage of graduate employees:** The association between the percentage of undergraduate employees recruited and the employers' priority towards skill sets and competencies of the employees is examined by framing the following null hypothesis.

*H<sub>0</sub>: Percentage of undergraduate employees is not associated with employers' priority towards employee's skill sets and competencies*

Table 26 proved that there exists a highly significant association between the percentage of undergraduate employees recruited and the priority attached by the employers towards employees' skill sets and competencies.

**c. Percentage of postgraduate employees:** The following null hypothesis is framed for testing if there exists any association between the percentage of postgraduate employees and the employers' priority towards employees; skill sets and competencies.

*H<sub>0</sub>: Percentage of postgraduate employees is not associated with employers' priority towards employee's skill sets and competencies*

Table 27 showed that the calculated P-value is less than 0.01, which suggests that there exists a highly significant association between the percentage of postgraduate employees and the employers' priority towards employee's skill sets and competencies.

**Table 26: Undergraduate Employees**

<b>% of Undergraduate Employees</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Total</b>
Less than 10	0	6	6
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
11 – 20	0	6	6
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
21 – 30	10	4	14
	(71.4)	(28.6)	(100.0)
31 – 40	0	4	4
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
41 – 50	0	3	3
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
61 – 70	12	3	15
	(80.0)	(20.0)	(100.0)
71 – 80	4	0	4
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
81 – 90	3	0	3
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
91 – 100	8	11	19
	42.1	57.9	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:8</b>	<b>Chi-square: 34.445</b>	<b>P-value: .000</b>	<b>Significant</b>

**Table 27: Postgraduate Employees**

<b>% of Postgraduate Employees</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Total</b>
Less than 10	4	6	10
	(40.0)	(60.0)	(100.0)
11 – 20	18	17	35
	(51.4)	(48.6)	(100.0)
21 – 30	3	0	3
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
31 – 40	8	0	8
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
51 – 60	0	3	3
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
61 – 70	4	0	4
	(100.0)	(0.0)	(100.0)
71 – 80	0	3	3
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
91 – 100	0	8	8
	(0.0)	(100.0)	(100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Df:7</b>	<b>Chi-square: 28.429</b>	<b>P-value: .000</b>	<b>Significant</b>

### Limitations of the Study

The data being primary in nature, limitations applicable to primary data are equally applicable to the present study. The sample is confined to the employers located in and around Muscat City alone. Hence due care should be taken before generalizing the results of the study to other areas. The validity of the opinions expressed by the respondents is subject to the inherent bias by the respondents.

### Conclusion/Recommendations

The study has considered the opinion of the employers who have had a significant number of employees having both graduate and postgraduate employees for the last five years. One can believe that the results are more reliable and can be generalized with the least value deviation. Almost 50% of the respondents are from the private sector. The sample consists of employers directly or indirectly related to the Oil and Gas sector constituting almost 45%, followed by the Education sector with 15%. There is a direct relationship found between the size of the firm in terms of the number of employees and their level of education. Further, small firms rely more on employees who

are foreign-educated graduates than large firms do (Tansel et al., 2013).

Training opportunities provided to the employees show a positive correlation between the intensity of training and the size of the firm. Smaller firms provide a greater number of training opportunities than large firms do. The results agree with the findings of Waddoups (2011). The study reveals that there is no significant difference between the size of the firms and their recruitment strategy during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic. As a matter of fact, the COVID 19 pandemic has not significantly affected the recruitment plan of the employers. The study reveals that the employees' skills relating to language, such as reading and writing in English, Computer, Analysis and problem-solving, planning, organizing and decision-making, and Teamwork, are the most preferred skills and competencies for employment.

The study also takes into consideration the priority metrics from the employers' viewpoint, where adaptability, computer skills, language skills such as reading and writing in English, planning, organizing and decision-making skills, and team working skills are the most preferred skill sets required of the employees in the employment market during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic. 44% of employers consider foreign-educated students more reliable than local graduates. Smaller firms tend to recruit a greater number of foreign-educated students than large firms do.

From the analysis of Garrett's Ranking Technique, most of the employers prefer students who are well-versed in business administration followed by accounting & finance, Marketing, etc. Proactive, enthusiastic fresh graduates, Omanization, and work ethics are the priority factors considered by employers during recruitment. It is also disclosed that the anticipated growth in business, cost control, quality of employees' service, etc. are the most influential factors considered for recruiting employees during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic.

There is a shortage of applicants with the right skills, competencies and capabilities in Oman. The inability to notify the vacancies, ineffective hiring process and the inability to offer a competitive salary are the major problems faced by employers during the recruitment process. The study also reveals that creating awareness among the students on the graduate attributes that they should possess by the time they graduate, making the students more self-reliant, providing entrepreneurial skills, etc. are the methods the educational institutions should adopt for improving the students' employability skills during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic and the aftermath. Multiple regression results indicate that the level of educational qualifications of employees positively influence the employability skill sets as expected by the employers.

The higher the level of education the better the scope for the employees to get recruited. The number of training programs organized, and the employees' skill sets are positively related. Organizing a greater number of training programs by the organization improves employees' skill sets. The level of satisfaction of the employers is positively influenced by the level of the employees' education and the training opportunities provided. Higher educational levels result in a greater level of employers' satisfaction. The study reiterates that the employers should offer appropriate training opportunities considering the current COVID 19 pandemic crisis that affects the nature of employment, for their employees to enhance their perception about the scope of their roles and responsibilities in a new working environment and their ability to cope with the business risks.

Chi-square analysis shows that the ownership differential does not affect the priority of the employers towards the skill sets required for their employees. There exists a highly significant association between the percentage of employees -graduate and postgraduate- and their skill sets and competencies. Further, the training opportunities provided to the employees enhance their skills and competencies. Colleges and Universities must invite the local employers and employment agencies to annual forums like industry advisory board meetings, employers meet etc., for understanding the industry expectations on the skills and competencies of the graduates to bridge the gap between what the students learn in their classrooms and what they should possess for being successful in their employment market. Therefore, educational institutions should create awareness among the students on the graduate attributes that they should possess by the time they graduate, make them more self-reliant, provide entrepreneurial skills, etc. These initiatives are adopted by the higher educational institutions, however, the methods adopted by them produce ineffective results in terms of sharpening students' employability skills during the period of the COVID19 pandemic and the aftermath, the study reveals.

### **Practical Implications of the Study**

The Framework of the research provides a basis for strengthening and streamlining the linkages between business firms, educational institutions, and the students in the Sultanate of Oman. Curriculum development is planned and executed considering the demands of the Country. The study adds value to learner-centered education by blending industrial work experience into the teaching and learning process.

The study which considers the expectations of different stakeholders of the higher education sector in Oman provides recommendations to them. By strengthening the nexus between different stakeholders, the study insists that Universities and Colleges should focus on offering value-added programs for improving the skills and competencies of graduates in Oman. The study assists the policymakers to adopt work-integrated-learning for bridging the gap between what graduates know and what is expected of them by the industry. Therefore, the role

of educational institutions in students' placement is successfully fulfilled. Employers can recruit graduates who can fulfill their expectations within the resources locally. So, dependence on the foreign workforce can be minimized which supports the national agenda called Omanisation. For the students, the study provides for rationalization of education across the country removing disparities between the educational facilities of urban and rural areas in Oman. That the students understand the expectations of business firms will make them market-ready graduates.

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