

STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS FOR ENGLISH STUDENTS: ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH BETTER CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is a significant misalignment between the curricula of Pakistani universities and the demands of the local job market. This issue seems particularly obvious for English undergraduate students who, despite having completed a 4-year BS program, struggle to either pass competitive exams for earning jobs or qualify M.Phil. and Ph.D. entrance exams to secure admissions. These exams often include analytical reasoning and mathematics, which seem irrelevant to students' degree in linguistics and literature. This misalignment indicates a broader systemic issue where educational content is not in conjunction with students' fields of study or market demands. This study using a quantitative methodology, collected data from BS English graduates and employers through a standardized questionnaire and identified the gaps between university curricula and demands of the job market. It further emphasizes the mismatch in assessment criteria and curriculum content, focusing on fields such as semantics, pragmatics, phonetics, critical discourse analysis, and literary studies, including novels, criticism, and poetry. The study draws on Human Capital Theory and Curriculum Theory. Human Capital Theory considers education as a critical investment required to develop a skilled workforce. Curriculum Theory emphasizes the designing of a curriculum that is relevant to societal needs, ensuring comprehensiveness and connectedness. The existing disconnect suggests an inadequate utilization of human capital, leaving students unprepared for their careers. To bridge this gap, Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) should re-align curricula and assessment methods with relevant fields of study. Applying Constructive Alignment Theory, which concurs learning objectives, teaching methods, and evolutions, could better equip students with the necessary competencies. Addressing this gap is important to retaining talent in our country and preparing our students for successful careers.

Keywords: strategic solutions, English students, employability, retaining talent, curriculum alignment, industry relevance, brain drain, Linguistics, Literature, Language, BS English, MS English, PhD. English.

INTRODUCTION

Our higher education sector has expanded considerably over the decades, with numerous universities offering a wide range of academic programs across various disciplines. However, this rapid expansion has not always been aligned with reforms in curriculum quality and relevance. As a result, our students often struggle to meet market/employer demands and consider

themselves ill-prepared for the competitive job market and industry.

There seems to be a clear disparity between the courses taught in our universities and the skills tested in entrance and competitive exams for higher education and employment. For example, students pursuing degrees in English language and literature often encounter challenges when they appear in entrance exams of M.Phil/MS or PhD admissions,

facing questions in quantitative reasoning, analytical reasoning, mathematics, and other areas unrelated to their field. This disconnect or misalignment not only causes anxiety, frustration and disappointment among students but also hampers their ability to secure admission to higher educational opportunities and pursue careers relevant to their field of specialization.

This issue of huge concern is not restricted to a specific discipline but extends to a wide spectrum of academic domains across multiple Pakistani universities. The lack of industry experience/internship, pragmatic training, and emphasis on soft skills further worsens the situation. As a result, even after completing particular academic programs, many graduates find themselves unprepared to face real-world challenges, leading to high rates of underemployment and unemployment among both fresh and older graduates.

Furthermore, this educational disparity has significant socio-economic outcomes, leading to the phenomenon of brain drain. Talented and sharp individuals, unable to find suitable opportunities within their own country, Pakistan, often wish to seek education and employment opportunities abroad. Despite seemingly tougher intake criteria and competition, they are more easily acknowledged there. This negative trend ultimately reduces Pakistan's intellectual capital and undermines efforts to develop a capable workforce that can ensure economic stability, growth, and innovation.

Pakistan's such academic landscape has long been a subject of concern and debate due to its misalignment with the evolving demands of the job market. Despite significant investments by our governments in the higher education sector, a noticeable gap still persists between what is taught in our educational institutions and the requirements of the workforce. This misalignment has broad implications for the economy in general, and for our university graduates in particular.

The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan plays an important role in aligning the curriculum with the contemporary job market. However, it seems that our policy-making bodies are not able to fulfill their responsibilities as they should. We need to go beyond an extra mile by implementing strategic revisions in our educational policies to bridge the gap between education and employment.

This is essential because it will enable us to improve the employability of graduates, retain talent within the country, control brain drain, and develop a more competitive and dynamic economy.

Research Objectives:

1. Assess the alignment between English programs at Pakistani universities and industry expectations.
2. Examine the effect of curriculum-job market mismatches on postgraduate admissions and the employability of English graduates.

Research Questions:

1. What are the gaps between English programs in Pakistani universities and job market requirements?
2. How does the mismatch between university curricula and industry demands impact postgraduate admissions and job opportunities for English graduates in Pakistan?

Multiple reasons contribute to the gap between the curriculum of our universities and the demands of the job market.

1. Outdated Curriculum

Many of our universities in Pakistan follow an outdated curriculum which is poles apart from the contemporary demands of the job market. This outmoded curriculum generally lacks the contents that could promote modern technologies, skills and methodologies that are quite essential in today's professional scenario as a result of which our students are not sufficiently prepared to face challenges in the workforce or the ones they'll potentially have to face in pursuing their higher education

2. Mismatch Between Education and Industry Requirements

It is evident that a considerable disparity exists between the curriculum taught to students in universities and the actual requirements of the job market. For instance, prospective English students are often evaluated based on their analytical reasoning and mathematical skills during entrance exams, which may not be directly applicable to their field of study. This mismatch results in students being ill-equipped for job roles that necessitate specialized knowledge in areas such as

literature, linguistics, or Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

3. Lack of Practical Training and Internships

Academic institutions in Pakistan predominantly prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical skills development. The dearth of practical training, internships, and hands-on experience leaves students devoid of the practical competencies essential for success in the professional realm. Employers increasingly seek candidates capable of applying their theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios, and the absence of practical exposure acts as a barrier to securing suitable employment opportunities.

4. Insufficient Emphasis on Soft Skills

While technical expertise is undeniably important, the significance of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, the academic curriculum frequently overlooks the development of these crucial interpersonal abilities, leaving graduates unprepared for navigating the complex dynamics of the professional environment.

5. Inadequate Career Counseling and Guidance

A notable number of students in Pakistan lack access to essential career counseling and guidance services that play a pivotal role in helping individuals comprehend the intricacies of the job market and make informed decisions regarding their academic and professional pursuits. The absence of such support mechanisms can lead to students enrolling in courses that do not align with their career objectives or fail to meet the requirements of the ever-evolving job landscape.

6. Rigid or Inflexible Examination and Assessment Methods

The prevailing examination and assessment methodologies employed by universities in Pakistan often exhibit inflexibility, neglecting to accommodate the diverse skill sets and knowledge bases requisite across different disciplines. For instance, subjecting English students to irrelevant topics like mathematics and analytical reasoning during higher education entrance examinations can trigger unnecessary stress and discouragement,

thereby impacting their academic performance and hindering their professional growth.

7. Limited Industry-Academia Collaboration

The scarcity of collaboration between industry and academia in Pakistan hinders universities from staying abreast of the latest industry developments, skills, and technologies. This mismatch or disconnect results in a lack of integration of real-world practices into academic curricula and diminishes students' access to internships and exposure to industry environments critical for bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical requirements.

8. Brain Drain

The discrepancy between educational offerings and job market demands contributes to brain drain, where highly skilled individuals opt to pursue opportunities overseas. This phenomenon not only depletes the local talent pool but also deters improvements within the national education system, worsening the existing challenges.

9. Inadequate Funding and Resources

Numerous universities in Pakistan struggle with insufficient funding and resources, limiting their capacity to update curricula, furnish essential practical training facilities, and attract proficient faculty members. The inadequate investment in educational infrastructure directly impacts the quality of education and hinders graduates' readiness for the competitive job market.

10. Government and Regulatory Body Roles

Government entities and regulatory bodies, such as the Higher Education Commission, bear the responsibility of ensuring that university curricula evolve in conjunction with the dynamic and innovative job market requirements. By enforcing standards that align examination subjects with students' fields of study, they can cultivate an educational environment that better prepares individuals for professional success and can boost Pakistan's national economic growth.

Literature Review

The misalignment between university curricula and job market demands has become a critical issue globally, and this misalignment is particularly acute in countries like Pakistan. In the context of

Pakistani universities, the curriculum for English undergraduate programs often leaves students ill-prepared for professional success, highlighting a gap between academic training and the requirements of competitive exams or the job market. This section reviews the existing literature on curriculum misalignment, with a focus on the Human Capital Theory, Curriculum Theory, and Constructive Alignment Theory, providing insights into how these frameworks can inform the improvement of academic programs in Pakistan's higher education sector.

Misalignment Between Curriculum and Market Demands

A growing body of research emphasizes the gap between educational curricula and labor market needs. Studies indicate that students, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, face significant challenges in finding employment due to an academic focus that is often theoretical and disconnected from practical skills required in the workplace (Shah et al., 2018). This gap is evident in the Pakistani context, where English graduates, despite completing a rigorous four-year degree, struggle to pass competitive exams that often include analytical reasoning and mathematical components, subjects that are peripheral to their training in linguistics and literature (Azam, 2020). This phenomenon is supported by research highlighting that graduates often lack the employability skills demanded by employers, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical skills (Sarfraz et al., 2019). Studies argue that universities must better prepare students for the evolving labor market by rethinking the content and delivery of their programs (Rasool & Botha, 2011). This is particularly relevant in the context of Pakistan's English undergraduate programs, which focus heavily on fields like semantics, phonetics, and literary studies but often overlook the development of practical skills relevant to the job market.

The Role of Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, proposed by Schultz (1961) and further developed by Becker (1964), posits that education is an investment in human capital, equipping individuals with skills and knowledge that increase their productivity and value in the labor market. In this framework, the

effectiveness of an educational system is measured by how well it prepares students for employment, thus creating a skilled workforce that can contribute to economic development.

Studies based on Human Capital Theory suggest that when curricula are misaligned with market needs, there is a failure in this investment (Hanushek, 2020). In the case of Pakistan, where university curricula in English do not emphasize the competencies required in the professional world, there is a significant waste of human capital. Graduates find themselves unable to secure jobs or succeed in further academic pursuits, such as M.Phil. and Ph.D. programs, because the skills they acquire during their studies do not match the assessment criteria of competitive exams or the demands of employers (Azam, 2020).

Curriculum Theory and Educational Design

Curriculum Theory emphasizes the need for educational programs to be relevant, comprehensive, and connected to societal needs. Tyler (1949), one of the pioneers of Curriculum Theory, argued that curriculum development should start with clear objectives that respond to the needs of both students and society. More recent work in Curriculum Theory advocates for a design process that considers both the content of education and its alignment with the real-world challenges students will face after graduation (Pinar, 2019).

In Pakistan, the curriculum for English undergraduate programs has been criticized for its overemphasis on theoretical knowledge in areas such as literary criticism and phonetics, while offering little to no practical training in analytical reasoning or job-relevant skills (Shah et al., 2018). According to Pinar (2019), an effective curriculum is one that integrates both academic and practical learning, ensuring that students are equipped with a diverse set of competencies. In the Pakistani context, such integration is largely absent, leading to a disconnect between what is taught in classrooms and what is required in professional settings (Azam, 2020).

Constructive Alignment Theory: A Possible Solution

Constructive Alignment Theory, developed by Biggs (1996), offers a framework for improving curriculum design by aligning learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessments. Biggs argues

that educational programs should be structured so that students can achieve the learning outcomes that are expected of them, with assessments designed to measure the competencies that students are supposed to acquire (Biggs, 1996).

In the context of Pakistani higher education specifically undergraduate BS English program, Constructive Alignment Theory could serve as a valuable tool for bridging the gap between curriculum content relevant to Literature, language and linguistics and job market demands. By aligning the learning objectives of English programs with the skills required for competitive exams and employment, universities could better prepare students for their professional lives (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Research suggests that when learning objectives and assessments are aligned, students are more likely to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential in today's job market (Biggs, 1999).

This may somewhat relate even to Selecting the Right Career that suits ones passion and interests. Choosing the right specialization in a BS or MPhil English program is essential for aligning a student's academic focus with future career goals. Khan, W. M. (2022) By applying Biggs' Constructive Alignment Theory, universities can better match learning objectives with job market demands, ensuring students gain relevant skills in literature, language, and linguistics. This alignment can help students make informed decisions, preparing them more effectively for professional success.

The Impact of Curriculum Reforms

There have been several calls for reforming higher education curricula in Pakistan to better align them with job market demands. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has launched various initiatives aimed at improving curriculum design and enhancing the employability of graduates. However, the implementation of these reforms has been slow and inconsistent (Azam, 2020).

According to Rahman (2017), one of the key challenges in reforming higher education curricula in Pakistan is the resistance to change from both faculty and administration. There is a need for a systematic review of existing curricula and a commitment to aligning educational programs with the practical needs of students. By incorporating Constructive Alignment Theory into curriculum design, Pakistan's universities can ensure that their

programs not only provide academic knowledge but also equip students with the practical skills needed for success in the job market (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

The literature strongly suggests that there is a significant disconnect between the curricula of Pakistani universities and the demands of the job market, particularly for English undergraduate students. This misalignment is underpinned by theoretical frameworks such as Human Capital Theory and Curriculum Theory, both of which emphasize the need for educational programs to prepare students for real-world challenges. Constructive Alignment Theory offers a practical solution by aligning learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessments, ensuring that students acquire the skills they need to succeed professionally. To address this issue, Pakistan's Higher Education Commission must take concrete steps to reform curricula and re-align them with the competencies required in today's competitive job market.

The ultimate goal of the present study is to illuminate the gaps between university education and workforce demands in Pakistan, specifically within the domain of English studies. Based on the findings, practical recommendations will be proposed to align academic content with industry requirements, thereby improving students' career prospects and addressing the issue of brain drain.

Research Methodology:

This study adopted a quantitative research approach, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data from three primary stakeholder groups: employers, graduates, and current students. The questionnaire was designed to gather identify the perceived gaps between university curricula and industry needs, with a particular focus on the challenges English students faced in passing competitive exams and securing employment.

The data collected were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which helped identify key trends, patterns, and relationships between variables. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the responses, while inferential statistics explored the connections between factors such as curriculum relevance and job market requirements.

In addition, the study conducted a document analysis of university curricula, job market

expectations, and testing methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the existing gaps. The overall aim of the research was to highlight the discrepancies between university education and workforce demands in Pakistan, particularly within English studies. Based on the findings, practical recommendations were made to align academic content with industry standards, thereby enhancing students' employability and addressing the issue of brain drain.

Additionally, the study involved document analysis, including the review of university curricula, job market needs, and standardized testing criteria, to provide a deeper understanding of the existing gaps between education and industry.

By employing this methodology, the study highlighted the discrepancies between university education and employment needs in Pakistan, with a focus on English studies. The findings contributed to practical recommendations for aligning academic content with industry standards to enhance students' employability and address the issue of brain drain.

The ultimate goal of the study is to illuminate the gaps between university education and workforce demands in Pakistan, specifically within the domain of English studies. Based on the findings, practical recommendations have been proposed below to align academic content with industry requirements, thereby improving students' career prospects and addressing the issue of brain drain.

Findings and Recommendations

The study's findings reveal significant discrepancies between university curricula and the skills demanded by the job market, specifically within the English studies field. The quantitative data collected through the structured questionnaire indicated that a majority of employers perceive a gap in the preparedness of graduates, particularly in practical skills and soft skills. This aligns with the methodology employed, which highlighted the perceptions of three stakeholder groups: employers, graduates, and current students.

Analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) identified critical relationships between curriculum content and job market requirements. The results demonstrated that when learning objectives are misaligned with industry expectations, students face considerable

challenges in passing competitive exams and securing employment. The descriptive statistics supported this finding, revealing that a significant portion of students felt unprepared for the realities of the job market, which corroborates the concerns expressed by employers.

Additionally, the document analysis of university curricula indicated that while academic programs emphasize theoretical knowledge, they often neglect essential practical skills and soft skills necessary for professional success. This disconnect was evident in the challenges reported by graduates in transitioning from academic settings to the workforce. The study underscores the need for universities to integrate industry-relevant skills into their curricula, as emphasized by both employers and students during the survey.

The challenge of aligning educational outcomes with market demands can be addressed through the consistent and strategic organization of seminars, webinars, and interactive sessions featuring leading market experts, renowned industry professionals, and prominent industrialists. Universities, especially those receiving significant grants from the Government of Pakistan and the HEC should prioritize these events on a regular basis. This approach will provide students with the necessary knowledge about market requirements and help bridge the gap between the theoretical aspects of their academic studies and the practical demands of the job market. The frequency and persistence of these sessions are crucial to reinforcing their importance, as repeated emphasis can significantly impact students' perceptions of their relevance.

Furthermore, while there is a notable focus within our educational institutions on the development of hard skills, it is essential to give equal importance to soft skills. The formulation of policies that promote the teaching and acquisition of soft skills is essential, as these competencies are crucial in fostering collaboration, empathy, cooperation, kindness, brotherhood, and other interpersonal abilities necessary for success in today's highly competitive job market.

The primary researcher Waqar Mahmood Khan himself as an English lecturer with extensive experience, including his ongoing tenure at the University of Okara, Pakistan, has successfully organized more than 30 awareness events—such as seminars, webinars, sessions, and walks—and has

observed that a significant portion of the preparation time in organization of these events is consumed by efforts to enhance students' readiness. This observation suggests that students may not yet fully appreciate that these events are vital for fostering creativity, encouraging innovative thinking, and effectively bridging the gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired through their studies and the practical realities of the job market. At a prominent university in South Punjab, Pakistan, the primary researcher had the opportunity to attend a conference as an observer, where an intriguing observation was made. Students appeared to be attending the conference under duress, driven by the implicit threat of losing sessional marks if they failed to participate. Faculty members communicated that attendance at the conference was compulsory to secure these marks, resulting in a high turnout within the auditorium. This scenario highlights the complex challenge of fostering intrinsic motivation among students for engagement in academic events.

The prevailing hesitancy among students to actively participate in such conferences signals a systemic issue: a deficiency in the provision of adequate preparation and guidance by the academic department and instructors. If students had been effectively guided, either through explicit directives or subtle cues embedded within their coursework, regarding the indispensable role of these events in cultivating their professional acumen and enhancing their employability, their receptiveness might have been notably different. Those presently exhibiting reluctance towards attending conferences, even when devoid of any financial burden, might have exhibited a willingness to engage voluntarily if they were sufficiently motivated, even if it necessitated bearing a registration fee. Reflecting on researcher's personal teaching experience, he has not encountered the necessity to employ coercive methods. This can be attributed to the pedagogical approach he adopts in structuring his lectures, which organically instills in students the vital significance of active participation in such sessions for their prospective career advancement.

Finally, it is essential to reassess the methods used to evaluate the decision-making and cognitive abilities of Arts and English graduates. Instead of relying on traditional assessments like analytical reasoning, educators should consider more relevant

tasks, such as requiring students to write subjective essays on topics like crisis management and time management. This approach would provide a more accurate measure of the skills necessary for success in the modern job market.

Overall, the findings suggest that addressing these gaps through strategic curricular alignment and enhanced engagement initiatives—such as seminars and workshops—can significantly improve students' employability. By promoting a more cohesive relationship between academic content and industry demands, universities can better prepare students for successful careers in a competitive job market.

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