Employer Perceptions of Workforce Preparation of the Graduates of the Health Information Management and Technology Program

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Abstract: Background: Harmonization of the outcome of educational programs and the actual skills requirement of the labor market is a necessity in all countries. **Objectives:** The objective of this study was to assess the perceptions of employers on whether the academic experience of HIMT alumni/ employees is properly suited to the work environment. **Methods:** A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted in hospitals where graduates of HIMT / alumni / employees had begun their careers at the current study time. A questionnaire was used. **Results:** All employers indicated considerable satisfaction with the ability of their employees (HIMT alumni) to function in multi-disciplinary teams, to communicate adequately with clients and peers, to adhere to work rules and policies, to display interest and industry in work assignments, to understand of ethical issues, and with their ability to learn and use the computer and other modern tools of technology. **Conclusions:** All employers participating in this study demonstrated their satisfaction with HIMT alumni / employees, but indicated that there was, however, room for improvement.
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1. Introduction

The discovery of oil in the 1930s led to industrial evolution in Saudi Arabia creating a momentum for the shaping of the Saudi Arabian labor market. Despite its wealth in capital, the country is still short of labor [1]. The demand for a foreign workforce has increased, particularly in the private sector, where employment opportunities surpass that of the government sector [2]. According to the Talent Public.net's research department, up to 58% of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) workforce is made up of expatriates [3]. This situation has created challenges for the national workforce for the following reasons in particular: 1) recruitment in the private sector tends to favor foreigners because of the belief that they are better qualified than their Saudi counterparts. 2) Training costs are higher for new Saudi graduates who are ill-prepared. In line with the flourishing economy, the expansion of, or investment in education has led to a large supply of local graduates which, to some extent, exceeds the actual needs of the labor market. This in turn has widened the gap between educational output and the demands of the labor market. Consequently, to reduce this gap, it is important to assess the extent to which the outcome of the educational programs reflects the needs of the local market. One way of doing this is to assess the employers' views on the employees, as graduates of a specific educational program, and the degree to which fulfil their organizational needs.

The Department of Health Information Management and Technology (HIMT) at College of Applied Medical Sciences was established in the University of Dammam in 2003. The graduate students of HIMT program work as a link between health workers and Information Technology (IT) department. They can work in Quality Improvement Department, and understand the whole process of Medical Record (MR) and can, therefore, be part of the electronic medical record project implementation team. To the authors' knowledge, no previous studies have explored employers' perceptions of their employees who are graduates of the HIMT program at the University of Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

The objective of this study was to assess the perceptions of employers on whether their employees' [as graduates from HIMT program] academic experience properly measured up to the demands of the work environment.

Such an assessment might help to identify the impact of HIMT educational program, and eventually provide information about whether intended learning outcomes of HIMT program are being achieved, and whether students have acquired the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed by the employers in their organizations. This in turn, hopefully, will help to improve the quality of the HIMT program to meet the demands of the labor market.

In order for HIMT graduates to contend for places in today's highly competitive labor market, they must

equip themselves with the necessary knowledge, skills and disposition required for the world of work.

2. Material and Methods
Study Setting
The study was conducted in hospitals where HIMT alumni were working at the time of this study. There were five hospitals, three of which were governmental and two private in the Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia.
Study Design
A cross-sectional study during the period between April 1st and the end of May, 2010.
Target population and sample size
Up to the time of this study, there was no official process in the University of Dammam, for following up the work of HIMT alumni at their places of work. However, the authors of this study personally endeavored to contact former students' leaders and investigate the status of alumni. Twenty - two of the HIMT alumni including some of the first graduates of the year 2007 have been working in five hospitals, mainly in Medical Record and Quality Improvement departments. Accordingly, contact was made with the heads of the departments (or the direct managers) at these hospitals. Of these, only three (60 percent) hospitals agreed to be involved in this study. In these hospitals, both governmental and private, there was a total of six heads of departments (employers), mainly at Medical Record and Quality departments. Only four indicated their willingness to take part in this study, yielding a response rate of 67%.
Data Collection Tools
The questionnaires were delivered personally.
Instrument
A survey was developed with statements that had been adopted and or modified from various international surveys [4-9]. In addition, some statements were based on the relevant literature review and the booklet 'Learning goals and objectives of HIMT – Course Curriculum'. The survey involved 17 statements that explore the employer's perceptions concerning the performance of HIMT employees in their workplace. A Likert scale ranging from 1=very poor, to 5= very good was used. Seven open- ended questions were also included to elicit employers' views on further education, additional skills or talents required in such a career, the extent of professional success of HIMT employees, their willingness to recruit other employees who graduate from the HIMT program, what they expect from these graduates as professional employees, the strengths and weakness they have observed in the graduates of HIMT program as employees, and whether these employees contribute effectively (as individuals, team members or leaders) to achieve group and institutional goals. Furthermore, demographic variables including gender and the departmental site were collected (Appendix A).

Statistical analysis
As the number of participants was few, the analysis is mostly descriptive. The data cannot allow for statistical comparison between groups.

3. Results
All the employers were female. Three of them worked in private hospitals, while the other worked at a governmental hospital.

Table 1 shows the results of statements 1 to 17, showing the employers' perceptions regarding the performance of HIMT employees. All four employers revealed that they highly agreed with most of the statements. They were very satisfied with employees' (HIMT alumni) performance regarding the following abilities: functioning in a multi-disciplinary team, interest and industry displayed in work assignments, commitment to work rules and policies, communication skills, understanding of ethical issues and ability to learn and use the computer and other modern tools of technology.

When employers were asked about any further education, professional designations or other certifications required for HIMT employees to continue in their positions, all four employers stressed the importance of continuing education. In addition, three of them said that the HIMT employee needed project management, knowledge of administrative policies and procedures and Joint Commission International Accreditation (JCIA) standards. Moreover, two of the employers recommended that more emphasis should be put on coding, especially ICD-10 in the teaching of HIMT students, as most hospitals considered this skill very necessary.

With regard to the skills or talents required in employee's career, all four employers pointed out the importance of IT skills, communication and organizational skills, making quality management a habit, educational quality standard skills, compatibility, reliability and ability to work with multinational staff.

When employers were asked, "in comparison with other persons at a similar career stage, would you say this individual is professionally successful? If not, why?", only two of them believed that the HIMT employees were professionally successful in comparison with other persons at a similar career stage.

Regarding the employers' willingness to hire another person with a similar background as HIMT,

three employers expressed their willingness to recruit another graduate of HIMT program for certain career areas, such as discharge processing, transcription or coding.

With regard to the strengths and weaknesses observed of employees (graduates of HIMT program), all four employers perceived that the strength of graduates of HIMT program were, mainly in IT skills, adaptability, ability to work well in a team, ability to communicate professionally and ability to design a process. However, three employers observed weaknesses in areas relating to management skills, initiative, and motivation to work. One employer said that the limited experience was one of the limitations/weaknesses of HIMT employees.

With regard to the employer's expectations from HIMT graduates as professional employees, all four employers stressed the importance of continuous education as a means of becoming professional team players, outstanding organizers and designers of plans and systems, and being able to conform to the policies of the organization.

When employers were asked whether HIMT employees contributed effectively as individuals, team members or leaders to achieve group and institutional goals, all four employers indicated that HIMT graduates played their role as parts of the team well. Moreover, two of the employers emphasized that the HIMT employees worked in a very professional manner, and were considered a great asset.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of The employers Questionnaire (Likert scale ranged from 1+2= very poor + poor=poor , 3= Unsure, 4+ 5= good + very good= good)

n	Statement	Poor (%)	Unsure (%)	Good (%)
1	Interest and industry displayed in work assignments.	0	0	100
2	Accuracy, completeness and orderliness of work itself.	0	0	100
3	Follows instructions, written or unwritten rules and policies.	0	0	100
4	Self-starting activity displayed in performance of duties.	0	25	75
5	Adaptability to changing conditions, reversals or new duties	0	0	100
6	HIMT employee has constructive ideas.	0	0	100
7	Punctuality in reporting to work.	0	0	100
8	Ability to function in multi-disciplinary teams	0	0	100
9	Ability to communicate with clients and peers	0	0	100
10	Ability to adapt to new problems and situations	0	0	100
11	Ability to take charge of tasks	0	0	100
12	Ability to learn and use the computer and other modern tools of technology	0	0	100
13	Understanding of broader professional and ethical issues	0	0	100
14	Understanding of societal and global issues as they relate to solution of problems	0	25	75
15	Ability to solve technical problems	0	0	100
16	Ability to design a system, component, or process to meet desired needs	0	50	50
17	Overall competency and performance as a HIMT employee	0	0	100

4. Discussions

The results of this study revealed that the graduates of the Health Information Management and Technology program performed well in relation to interpersonal skills. They showed their ability to adapt to new problems and situations, and to changing conditions or new duties; they showed initiative in the performance of their duties, followed instructions and policies, and were able to function in multi-disciplinary teams. According to the SCANS report [10] skillful workers in a highly competitive environment should be able to work with others and in a team. In a study conducted by Archer and Davison [11] to find out the perspective of employers on graduate employability, they found that employers put greater emphasis on the importance of soft skills, such as communication and team-work, rather than hard skills. The Edge/SCRE report [12], underscored the fact that skills such as teamwork and the ability to use own initiative were among the key skills valued by employers. According to McLeish [13] interpersonal and initiative skills are among the core work skills needed for small and medium enterprises.

With regard to computer related skills, employers felt that HIMT graduates were competent in the use of the computer and other modern technological tools, as well as in solving technical problems. According to the SCANS report [10], in a

high-performance workplace competent employees need to manipulate information so they can obtain, organize, analyze data and make use of computers to process information. In addition, the UKCES report [14] indicated that workers should acquire employability skills such as IT and problem solving skills that enables them to do almost any task. Similarly, the European Commission report [15] confirmed that teamwork, communication, adaptability and computer skills were among the first five important skills looked for when recruiting graduates with higher education.

Employers also believed that HIMT graduates performed well in management skills. According to them the graduates possessed the ability to take charge of tasks in the workplace. Employers also believed that the graduates had the global awareness skills. In addition, the employers indicated that the HIMT graduates were able to demonstrate their understanding of societal and global issues as they related to solutions of problems. According to the SCANS report [10], employees in today's global labor force should have all of the skills mentioned above in order to compete effectively in the challenging labor force environment.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been shown that employers were very satisfied with the performance of their HIMT subordinate.

6. Recommendations

The result of this study recommends that:

First, the top management at the College of Applied Medical Sciences should set up a unit for continuous program assessment to serve its different departments; and involve all parties and stakeholders such as the employers, in its program assessment process.

Second, the decision makers of the department of HIMT should play a significant role in developing a formal/standard of program assessment that reflects the learning objectives and goals of the HIMT program as well as the necessary competencies expected of every graduate of HIMT.

Third, it is recommended that the decision-makers at the department of HIMT incorporate more technical content into the curricula in order to improve the knowledge base of graduates.

Finally, the coordinator at Students Training Affaires should strengthen the cooperation between the university and industry, using employers' feedback as a basis to modify the curriculum and adopt new strategies in teaching and learning.

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Appendix A: Employers Survey:

Overall, how would you rate our graduates' performance with regard to the following statements?

(1=Very poor, 2=Poor, 3=Unsure, 4=Good, 5=Very good)

n	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	Interest and industry displayed in work assignments.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Accuracy, completeness and orderliness of work itself.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Follows instructions, written or unwritten rules and policies.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Self-starting activity displayed in performance of duties.	1	2	3	4	5
5	Adaptability to changing conditions, reversals or new duties	1	2	3	4	5
6	HIMT employee has constructive ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Punctuality in reporting to work.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Ability to function in multi-disciplinary teams	1	2	3	4	5
9	Ability to communicate with clients and peers	1	2	3	4	5
10	Ability to adapt to new problems and situations	1	2	3	4	5
11	Ability to take charge of tasks	1	2	3	4	5
12	Ability to learn and use the computer and other tools of modern technology	1	2	3	4	5
13	Understanding of broader professional and ethical issues	1	2	3	4	5
14	Understanding of societal and global issues as they relate to problem solutions	1	2	3	4	5
15	Ability to solve technical problems	1	2	3	4	5
16	Ability to design a system, component, or process to meet desired needs	1	2	3	4	5
17	Overall competency and performance as a HIMT employee	1	2	3	4	5

1. In this position, what further education, professional designations or other certifications are required?
2. What are the skills or talents required in such career?
3. In comparison with other persons at a similar career stage, would you say this individual is professionally successful? If not, why?
4. If you had another position to fill, would you be inclined to recruit another graduate of HIMT program? If not, why?
5. What strengths and weakness did you observe in graduates of HIMT program as employees?
6. What do you expect from HIMT graduates as professional employees?
7. Are HIMT employees contributing effectively as individuals, team members or leaders to achieve group and institutional goals?

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