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Exploring employability gap: The case of social-science senior students

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Article Info

Abstract

In the aim to explore employability in Thailand from both the demand and supply sides, this study analyzes employability gaps in Thailand through comparing the employers' demand and the supply of 4th year social-science students, in the context of pandemic and technological disruption. The data were collected from online questionnaire surveys conducted upon 250 HR managers/recruiters for the demand side, and 350 senior social-science students for the supply side. The survey asks how the employers prioritize the qualifications of applicants, while the students were asked to self-evaluate their qualifications. The data were examined through the perspective of "employability components" based on an earlier-published work, which has derived employability qualifications from the interviews of 30 HR managers. The data were then analyzed by utilizing sample means and standard deviations. Among the three employability components, the results reveal that the employers prioritized attitudes, followed by adaptability and then career ability. On attitudes, 'respectfulness to diversity' is ranked highest, while 'the ability to change quickly and perseverance' is required most in adaptability. For career ability, the employers emphasized 'the fit with firms' corporate culture and value the most. By comparing HR demand to the students' self-evaluation, the widest gap is found in the core component of adaptability followed by career ability, and then attitudes. The research is beneficial both conceptually and practically. It adds to the literature on employability, whereby the study on developing economies remains limited. Practically, the research findings could help preparing university graduates prior to entering the labor market.

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Introduction

The economic recession that resulted from Covid yielded stress on employability (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Firms became more careful and selective in their hiring practices. Some employers resort to 'quiet hiring' through mobilizing existing employees to other jobs, rather than hiring new ones (Lindzon, 2023). Meanwhile, new graduates are facing a daunting challenge in finding a job. The recent batches of graduates have a disadvantage of being a lock-down generation (Watchter, 2020), whereby Covid barred them from regular study on campus which cut off their opportunities on skill development from joining in classes and other activities on and off campus. In any case, those well prepared with employability would have more chances.

What is 'employability'? The ILO (2014) defines it as the combination of factors and processes that enable people to progress towards or find employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their careers. Overtoom (2000), simply defines employability as basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job. According to Rahmat et al. (2012), employability is not only the set of knowledge and skills, but also a range of personal attributes that individuals need to have to be successful in their occupations. According to Yorke (2006), employability is a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. As such, attitudes and attributes represent the key parts of employability.

The term 'employability' has also been defined differently in different academic fields. In economics and business, it refers to the capacity and willingness of workers to remain attractive for work and successfully change jobs, if required. It refers to the skills that help workers secure and retain work (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Berntson et al., 2006). In education, employability relates to the achievements and self-reflective abilities of graduates that make them more likely to gain employment and be successful in chosen careers. This includes both subject-specific skills and broader competencies (Yorke, 2006; Bridgstock, 2009). Meanwhile, for human resource management, employability is the capability to gain and maintain fulfilling work. It combines individual and personal factors, such as knowledge, skills, health, with external factors related to the labor market (Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). In the field of psychology, employability refers to a psycho-social construct that enables workers to identify and realize career opportunities. This psycho-social construct mediates between an individual and a labor market. It promotes adaptation within changing work environments (Fugate et al., 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

The reviews above reveal that "employability" is quite a board term covering a wide range of characters that make an individual fit to the job. Some literature relabels and explains employability as career ability or career adaptability, which necessitates individuals not only to accumulate abilities but also to cultivate adaptability as it is useful in navigating career paths amid uncertainty and changes in order to remain employable (Rudolph et al., 2017; Storen et al., 2010).

Numerous studies attempt to identify components of employability. Some scholars indicate the importance of technical skills, soft skills like communication, problem-solving, teamwork, as well as personal attributes (Rahmat et al., 2012; Okolie et al., 2020; Suarta et al., 2017). Several researchers have investigated employers' perceptions of employability, their expectations, and skills they seek in potential employees. These studies employ surveys and interviews to gather data from employers across industries (Pollard et al., 2015). Meanwhile, some researchers have examined the role of higher education institutions in enhancing students' employability. They explored curricular interventions, work-integrated learning opportunities, career services, and partnerships with industry to foster employability (Jiang el al., 2022). It is apparent that these scholarly works tend to focus either on the demand side (employers' expectations) or the supply side (students' qualifications).

There are some studies in Southeast Asian countries, though still limited. Several studies were found from Malaysia. Juhdi et al (2013) analyze surveys from over 100 HR managers in Malaysia who ranked key competencies for graduates' employability. Technical proficiencies, soft skills, and personal attributes ranked among the top valued by employers in Malaysia. Buntat et al (2013) compares faculty members' and industry employers' assessments using an employability skills scale to measure readiness of Malaysian graduates and found gaps in problem-solving and creative skills. From Singapore, Low et al. (2021) argue that a major perception gap exists between graduates and employers regarding essential career readiness competencies beyond academic technical skills, especially in areas such as mindsets, practical abilities, and industry knowledge. They advocate for more extensive integrated learning experiences through platforms like work attachments

and internships to align graduate capabilities closer to employer expectations and labor market needs. In Thailand, research on employability is rare. Chorkaew (2013) touches upon employability in terms of personal qualifications, people-related skills, fundamental skills and thinking skills, but her target is for someone who is in the process of transforming careers not for the new graduates.

Our research thus aims to investigate the case on Thailand. We do so by exploring both demand and supply side on their expectations and perceptions regarding employability. The previous stage of our research involved conducting in-depth interviews with 30 top HR executives across industries in Thailand, from which we found three key components of employability in the views of employers hiring new graduates: career ability, adaptability, and attitudes. (Weerasombat et al., 2022). We also found the insight information in terms of sub-elements of each component (see Figure 1). Since it is difficult to have a unified definition of employability, a deductive approach, based on practitioners' views, seems to be a good way to investigate the issue. This study thus developed upon such approach.

To recap the accounts gained from our previous research, "career ability" refers to the potential of job seekers in understanding their career needs and setting goals for their own career paths. For adaptability, HR executives in Thailand view it as the ability to accept changes and failures as well as recover faster when facing a drastic change in the workplace or encountering failures in projects or assigned jobs. Attitudes, meanwhile, are perceived as the potential to express good characteristics as normal habits no matter what the environment is. Figure 1 summarizes the three core components with 25 sub-elements.

Methodology

This paper presents a part of our research which utilizes a mixed-method design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The previous stage has applied a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews to gather data related to employability in Thailand. Employing a quantitative approach, this phase of study seeks to confirm the three components and their sub-elements on employability. We conducted a broader questionnaire survey covering more HR participants as well as to investigate further on the ranking or priority among the three core components.
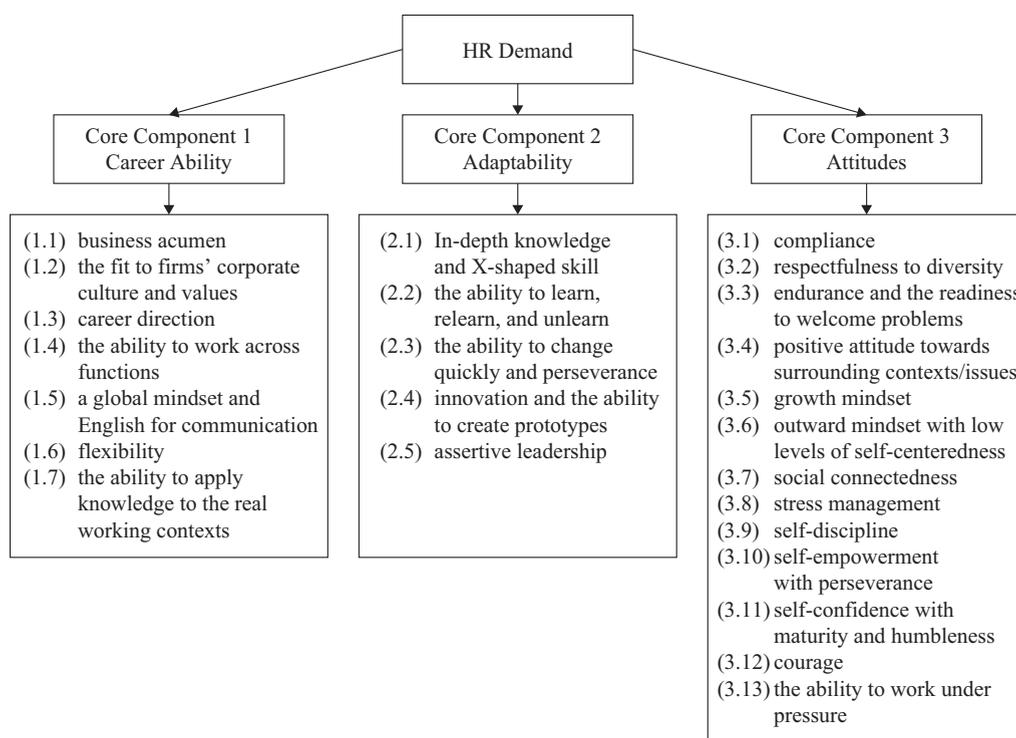
Figure 1 Conceptual framework: Three core components and sub-elements of employability
Source: Adapted from Weerasombat et al. (2022)

Participants

There are two groups of participants in this study: the employers represented by HR managers/recruiters and 4th year students from social-science faculties of one leading public university in Thailand. During July-October 2023, the online questionnaires were distributed to HR managers/recruiters across industries, who were members of the Personnel Management Association of Thailand (PMAT). 250 of them completed the questionnaires. More than half of them (56%) were HR managers. 67.9 percent worked in private firms, of which 35.9 percent had more than 2,000 employees. Overall, the target group arguably represents the job market quite well. Most of the respondents (41%) were aged between 30 and 39 years, (50.63%) graduated with master's degrees, (56%) were HR managers, and (67.93%) worked in private firms, with more than 2,000 employees (35.86%). Though without specific differences in type of business, such background can infer general viewpoint of employability. Meanwhile, during October-December 2023, online questionnaires were distributed to senior students majoring in social sciences. 350 of them completed the questionnaires. We chose this target group because social science graduates are likely to face a difficulty in landing a job, given the economic slow-down following the pandemic. Most of respondents (78.87%) were aged between 19–22 years. The top three majority of the respondents were from the Faculty of Social Administration, Journalism and Mass Communication, and Interdisciplinary Studies (23.66%, 20.85%, and 14.93%, respectively). Another 40.56 percent of respondents were from other social-science faculties, including the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Economics, and Political Science. Their majors may be diverse but can be classified in the field of social sciences, which is contrast with, for example, the disciplines of engineering, and science and technology. Moreover, apart from taking common fundamental courses in their freshy year, they may take elective classes in different majors.

Data Collection

This study employed two types of online questionnaires. The first questionnaires asked HR managers/recruiters to ranked the sub-elements, which were listed randomly. It uses disagree/agree criteria with five-scale points (1 as disagree to 5 most agree). The second questionnaires examine the employability as perceived through self-evaluation of senior social-science students. 25 sub-elements of employability are randomly listed. It employed quality scale (very poor - very good) with five scale points (1 - very poor to 5 - very good). In particular, the authors asked the students to evaluate themselves whether they own the characters that represent 25 sub-elements of employability or not. Also, they did not know that the total 25 sub-elements would be grouped into the three core components of employability (career ability, adaptability, and attitudes).

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for both types of questionnaire items, which ranged from 0.87 to 0.93, were used demonstrating the reliability of the constructs in these questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis (i.e., sample mean and standard deviations) was applied to confirm three significant points. The first point is to show the level of HR managers/recruiters' agreement in the priority of employability components/sub-elements. The second point is to display the different results in students' self-evaluation on each employability element. The last point is to present the gap of employability perceptions, comparing between the demand side of HR's views and the supply side from the students' self-evaluation.

Results and Discussion

HR Demand and Students' Self-Evaluation on Employability

The analysis of the survey demonstrates that among the three core components of employability the top rank or the highest requirement that HR managers/recruiters expect from new graduates is *'attitudes,'* followed by *'adaptability,'* and *'career ability'* (see Table 1). The students' survey demonstrates a similar direction in terms of the priority (see Table 2). These findings confirm that the students have quite clear awareness and understanding about the tendency of HR's expectation. However, the gaps between the demand and supply sides are prevalent.

Table 1 Views of HR managers / Recruiters on core components and sub-elements of employability

Ranking no.	Three components of employability	M	SD	Ranking		25 Sub-elements	M	SD
1	Core Component 3: Attitudes	4.49	0.44	1	(3.2)	respectfulness to diversity**	4.63	0.60
				2	(3.3)	endurance and the readiness to welcome problems	4.60	0.61
					(3.4)	positive attitudes towards surrounding contexts/issues	4.60	0.62
				3	(3.5)	growth mindset	4.59	0.62
				4	(3.9)	self-discipline	4.58	0.61
				5	(3.13)	an ability to work under pressure	4.55	0.61
				6	(3.7)	social connectedness	4.54	0.61
				7	(3.10)	self-empowerment with perseverance	4.49	0.66
					(3.11)	self-confidence with maturity and humbleness	4.49	0.65
				8	(3.12)	courage	4.45	0.65
				9	(3.6)	outward mindset with low levels of self-centeredness	4.32	0.64
					(3.8)	stress management	4.32	0.73
				10	(3.1)	compliance	4.20	0.80
2	Core Component 2: Adaptability	4.47	0.47	1	(2.3)	an ability to change quickly and perseverance*	4.68	0.55
				2	(2.2)	an ability to learn, relearn, and unlearn***	4.62	0.60
				3	(2.4)	innovation and the ability to create prototypes	4.43	0.64
				4	(2.5)	assertive leadership	4.33	0.73
				5	(2.1)	in-depth knowledge and X-shaped skill	4.30	0.77
3	Core Component 1: Career Ability	4.37	0.47	1	(1.7)	an ability to apply knowledge to the real working contexts	4.54	0.63
				2	(1.6)	flexibility	4.44	0.68
				3	(1.2)	the fit to firms' corporate culture and values	4.43	0.70
				4	(1.4)	the ability to work across functions	4.42	0.71
				5	(1.3)	career direction	4.38	0.67
				6	(1.1)	business acumen	4.26	0.75
				7	(1.5)	a global mindset and English for communication	4.06	0.87

Remarks: Among the 25 sub-elements, the top three are (2.3) the ability to change quickly and perseverance*, (3.2) respectfulness to diversity**, and (2.2) the ability to learn, relearn, and unlearn.**
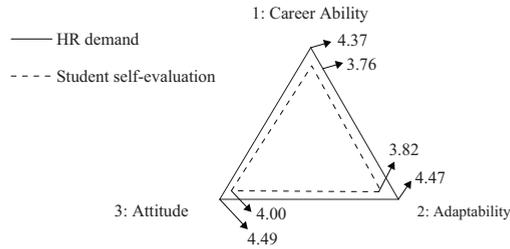
Table 2 Students' self-evaluation on employability

Ranking no.	Three components of employability	M	SD	Ranking		25 Sub-elements	M	SD
1	Core Component 3: Attitudes	4.00	0.58	1	(3.2)	respectfulness to diversity*	4.66	0.56
				2	(3.6)	outward mindset with low levels of self-centeredness	4.24	0.76
				3	(3.3)	endurance and the readiness to welcome problems***	4.17	0.85
				4	(3.5)	growth mindset	4.13	0.86
				5	(3.4)	positive attitudes towards surrounding contexts/issues	4.08	0.86
				6	(3.11)	self-confidence with maturity and humbleness	4.04	0.83
				7	(3.9)	self-discipline	4.01	0.85
				8	(3.13)	an ability to work under pressure	3.94	0.88
				9	(3.7)	social connectedness	3.83	0.97
				10	(3.1)	compliance	3.79	0.82
				11	(3.10)	self-empowerment with perseverance	3.76	0.93
				12	(3.8)	stress management	3.69	0.91
				13	(3.12)	courage	3.66	0.90
2	Core Component 2: Adaptability	3.82	0.68	1	(2.3)	an ability to change quickly and perseverance**	4.19	0.83
				2	(2.2)	the ability to learn, relearn, and unlearn	4.06	0.87
				3	(2.5)	assertive leadership	3.64	0.96
				4	(2.4)	innovation and the ability to create prototypes	3.61	0.93
				5	(2.1)	in-depth knowledge and X-shaped skill	3.59	0.89
3	Core Component 1: Career Ability	3.76	0.60	1	(1.2)	the fit to firms' corporate culture and values	4.12	0.80
				2	(1.6)	flexibility	4.04	0.86
				3	(1.7)	the ability to apply knowledge to the real working contexts	3.99	0.81
				4	(1.3)	career direction	3.56	1.15
				5	(1.4)	the ability to work across functions	3.54	1.04
				6	(1.1)	business acumen	3.53	0.84
				7	(1.5)	a global mindset and English for communication	3.52	1.07

Remarks: Among the 25 sub-elements, the top three are (3.2) respectfulness to diversity*, (2.3) the ability to change quickly and perseverance**, and (3.3) endurance and the readiness to welcome problems.***

*Employability Gaps between HR Demand and Students' Self-Evaluation*

By comparing between HR demand and the students' self-evaluation, the gaps of all three core components as well as sub-elements of employability were evident. Figure 2 shows that the largest gap between HR demand and students' self-evaluation is 'adaptability,' followed by 'career ability' and 'attitudes' (mean gap = 0.65, 0.61, and 0.49 respectively). The positive side is that the gap in 'attitudes' is smallest. According to HR managers/recruiters, this qualification represents the most important element of employability and is at the peak demand.

Additionally, Figure 3–5 show the details of the sub-elements in the three core employability components. For the component of 'career ability,' which comprises 7 sub-elements, the greatest gap was found in '(1.4) the ability to work across function' (mean gap = 0.88). Such finding indicates that career counseling and career guidance is needed for the students, so that they can have a clearer direction of their future career before graduation. Universities should seek partnerships with private companies, including job recruitment ones, to develop career ability for graduating students. This can be done through MOUs with them to organize training camps and other activities, which should help students to know more about the companies, work nature, and career there.

Three core components of employability	Mean (HR demand)	Mean (Student self-evaluation)	Mean Gap
1. Career ability	4.37	3.76	0.61
2. Adaptability	4.47	3.82	0.65
3. Attitudes	4.49	4.00	0.49

**Figure 2** The gaps on the three core components of employability
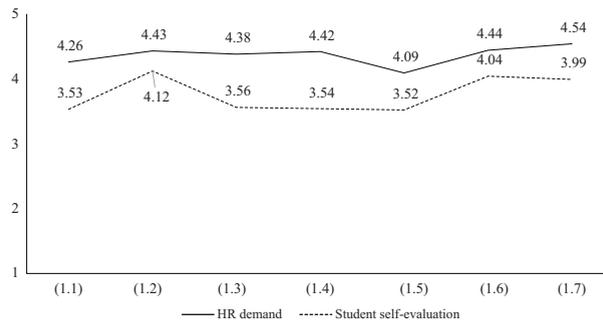
7 Sub-elements of Career Ability	Mean Gap
(1.1) business acumen	0.73
(1.2) the fit to firms' corporate culture and values	0.31
(1.3) career direction	0.82
(1.4) an ability to work across functions	0.88
(1.5) a global mindset and English for communication	0.57
(1.6) flexibility	0.40
(1.7) an ability to apply knowledge to the real working contexts	0.55

Figure 3 The gaps on career ability
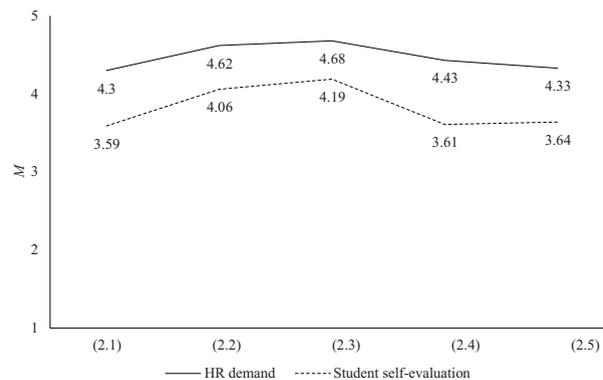
5 Sub-elements of Adaptability	Mean Gap
(2.1) in-depth knowledge and X-shaped skill	0.71
(2.2) an ability to learn, relearn, and unlearn	0.56
(2.3) an ability to change quickly and perseverance	0.49
(2.4) innovation and the ability to create prototypes	0.82
(2.5) assertive leadership	0.69

Figure 4 The gaps on adaptability
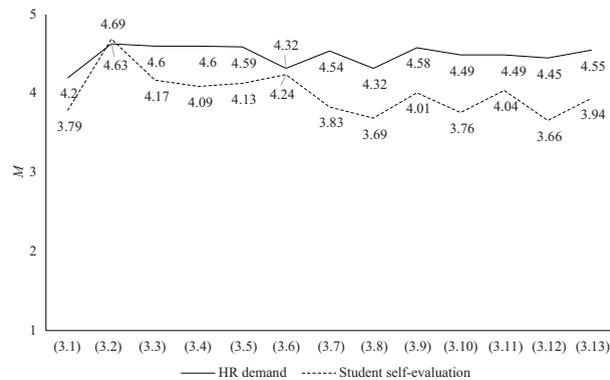
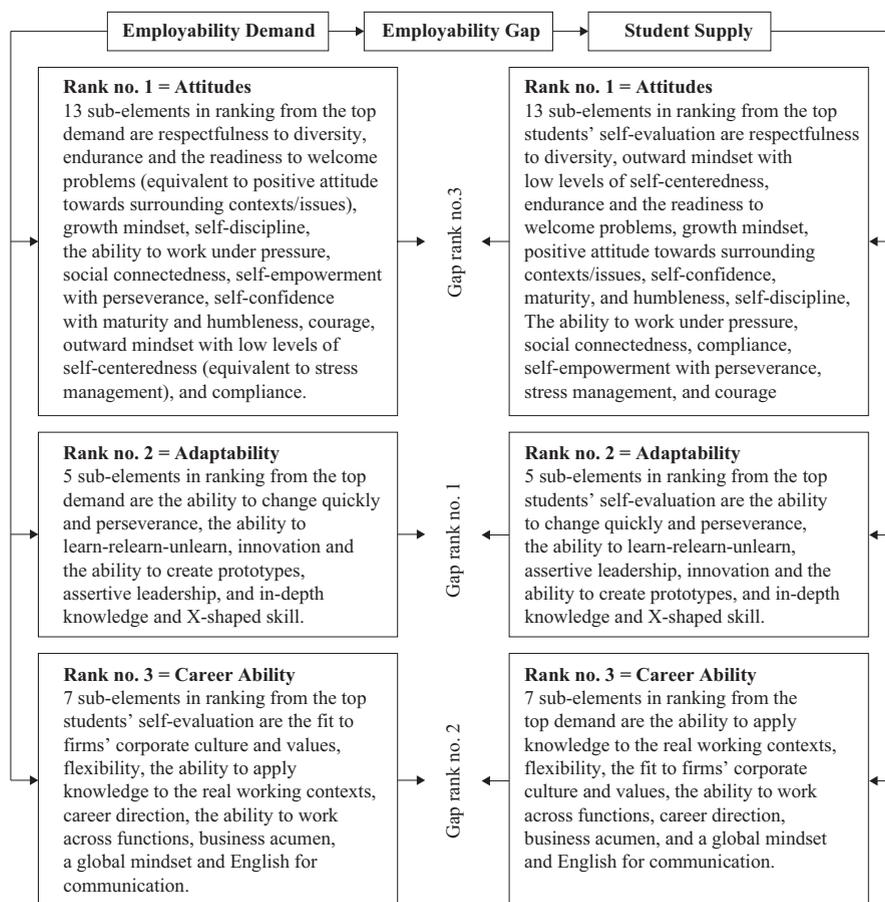| 13 Sub-elements of Attitudes	Mean Gap
(3.1) compliance	0.41
(3.2) respectfulness to diversity	(+) 0.06
(3.3) endurance and the readiness to welcome problems	0.43
(3.4) positive attitude towards surrounding contexts/issues	0.51
(3.5) growth mindset	0.46
(3.6) outward mindset with low levels of self-centeredness	0.08
(3.7) social connectedness	0.71
(3.8) stress management	0.63
(3.9) self-discipline	0.57
(3.10) self-empowerment with perseverance	0.73
(3.11) self-confidence with maturity and humbleness	0.45
(3.12) courage	0.79
(3.13) an ability to work under pressure	0.61

Figure 5 The gaps on attitudes

For the component of 'adaptability,' consisting of 5 sub-elements, the most discrepancy between HR demand and students' self-evaluation was in '(2.4) innovation and the ability to create prototypes' (mean gap = 0.82). Such finding reveals that the curriculum and teaching style should focus and provide more opportunities for students to accumulate their innovation capacity through project-based practices which allow them to adjust and readjust many times. Further, undergraduate courses should focus on real-world case studies so that students can learn how to solve problems and adapt to different situations. Establishing strong internship and cooperative education programs with industry partners, along with hosting guest lectures and workshops from industry/business professionals, can give students the opportunities to enhance their adaptability skill to fit the current job market demand.

For the component of 'attitudes', comprising 13 sub-elements, the widest discrepancy was revealed in the sub-element of '(3.12) courage' (mean gap = 0.79). Such finding infers that teaching activities need to push the students to speak out, to do a public presentation, and have more opportunities to share their ideas, so as to promote student courage. Also, it is remarkable

that among all 25 sub-elements of the three core components of employability, the character of '(3.2) respectfulness to diversity' holds the prominent character. It is at a higher level (mean = 4.69), compared to HR demand (mean = 4.63). This result confirms one of the characters of the university under this survey, in terms of working and living amid social diversity. According to the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings, on the SDG Goal 5 "Gender Equality," this university was ranked 7 out of 1,081 educational institutions around the world and is regarded as the number one in Thailand.

The findings illustrated above present the employability more in specific details both on the prioritized elements from the demand and supply sides respectively as well as the gaps between them. On the demand side, the scope of career ability, adaptability, and attitude are in line with the exiting literature discussing the definition of employability, which broadly covers a range of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes (Rahmat et al., 2012; Bridgstock, 2009; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Yorke, 2006). What is added on by this study is the priority of employability ranked through this order: attitudes, adaptability, and career ability (Figure 6).

Employability Demand	→	Employability Gap	→	Student Supply

Rank no. 1 = Attitudes
13 sub-elements in ranking from the top demand are respectfulness to diversity, endurance and the readiness to welcome problems (equivalent to positive attitude towards surrounding contexts/issues), growth mindset, self-discipline, the ability to work under pressure, social connectedness, self-empowerment with perseverance, self-confidence with maturity and humbleness, courage, outward mindset with low levels of self-centeredness (equivalent to stress management), and compliance.

Rank no. 1 = Attitudes
13 sub-elements in ranking from the top students' self-evaluation are respectfulness to diversity, outward mindset with low levels of self-centeredness, endurance and the readiness to welcome problems, growth mindset, positive attitude towards surrounding contexts/issues, self-confidence, maturity, and humbleness, self-discipline, The ability to work under pressure, social connectedness, compliance, self-empowerment with perseverance, stress management, and courage

Gap rank no.3

Rank no. 2 = Adaptability
5 sub-elements in ranking from the top demand are the ability to change quickly and perseverance, the ability to learn-relearn-unlearn, innovation and the ability to create prototypes, assertive leadership, and in-depth knowledge and X-shaped skill.

Rank no. 2 = Adaptability
5 sub-elements in ranking from the top students' self-evaluation are the ability to change quickly and perseverance, the ability to learn-relearn-unlearn, assertive leadership, innovation and the ability to create prototypes, and in-depth knowledge and X-shaped skill.

Gap rank no. 1

Rank no. 3 = Career Ability
7 sub-elements in ranking from the top students' self-evaluation are the fit to firms' corporate culture and values, flexibility, the ability to apply knowledge to the real working contexts, career direction, the ability to work across functions, business acumen, a global mindset and English for communication.

Rank no. 3 = Career Ability
7 sub-elements in ranking from the top demand are the ability to apply knowledge to the real working contexts, flexibility, the fit to firms' corporate culture and values, the ability to work across functions, career direction, business acumen, and a global mindset and English for communication.

Gap rank no. 2

Figure 6 The ranking of demand supply and the gap of employability

Attitudes came out as the first demand, which is in line with the existing literature that emphasizes the significance of positive attitudes in getting a job upon graduation (Arthur et al., 2005). In line with Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden (2006), the employers in the Thai context also value career ability as highly needed from the applicants to gain the job. Some literature even puts employability in another way as career ability or career adaptability (Rudolph et al., 2017; Storen, et al., 2010).

Conclusion and Recommendation

This research aims to fill the gap in literature on two fronts. One is to add to scholarly works in Asian contexts, which remain limited. Another is to investigate both demand and supply sides. Several conclusions can be drawn from the data analysis and discussion above.

First, considering the three core components of employability expected from the demand side, the employers prioritize attitudes first, followed by adaptability, then career ability. This expectation is in line with students' self-evaluation of their qualifications, which means students have an understanding on employers' demand to a certain extent but further development is expected. Second, there are some outstanding gaps between the employability as respectively perceived by the demand and the supply sides. The largest gap is in the adaptability, which means students need to develop this element first.

Third, when looking further into sub-elements of each core component presenting according from the top demand, the followings are found. For attitudes, 'courage' represented the utmost discrepancy between the demand and supply side. Such finding infers that more teaching activities that allow the students to speak out and do public presentation, as well as to have more opportunities are needed to nurture student courage. Yet, there is a sub-element on "respect for diversity",

where the students scored higher than HR managers' expectations. This means the students are outstanding on that front, which is suitable for current working life which may involve a high degree of diversity.

For adaptability, the largest disparity is found in the sub-element of 'innovation and the ability to create prototypes.' Such reveals that curriculum and teaching should focus and provide more opportunities for students to develop innovative capability. Furthermore, courses should emphasize real-world case studies that involve problem-solving and adaptability. Strong internships and cooperative education programs with industry partners, as well as guest lectures and workshops by industry/ business professionals, can help students develop the adaptability skills needed to meet current job market demand.

For career ability, the greatest gap between HR demand and students' self-evaluation is in the sub-element of 'career direction with a clear purpose.' Such finding indicates that career counseling and career guidance is needed for students, so that they can have a clearer direction of their future career before graduation. Universities should partner with private companies through MOUs and design learning activities as well as workshops that help students to understand their career goal before their graduation.

Apart from adding to the literature on employability, this study also has important practical implications. Concerning the problem of social-science graduates being at risk of unemployment in Thailand, data on the demand side derived from 250 HR mangers/recruiters can be used as a baseline to understand the details of employability required. From the supply side, the data from the supply side of the social-science students can give some picture to understand employability gaps. To bridge the gaps, this study suggests universities redesign and adjust their learning patterns and systems into student-centered ones. The learning technique should no longer be just lecture-based or one-way, but should help students to accumulate employability and to increase their self-development as much as possible. For example, problem-based and project-based learning, which simulate real work situations, are conducive to such development. Pragmatism and self-development should be at the center of class consideration. Class evaluation should focus on process, by which students are encouraged to make several adjustments to their projects. In addition, students should be provided with information and knowledge about careers, so that they can think about their career options. Inviting professionals to share experiences would also be beneficial for students.

For future research, while the survey on the demand side has been quite comprehensive, covering 250 HR managers/recruiters, it would be helpful to analyze firm sizes and types if they affect the employability demand. For the supply side of students, further research should be conducted to a wider target group from multiple universities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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