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Matching University Graduates' Competences with Employers' Needs in Taiwan

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Abstract

The dramatic expansion of the number of higher educational institutions in Taiwan has contributed a great deal to the growing unemployment rate of university graduates. Given the accumulated number of students who graduated in previous years and failed to find a job, the pressure of finding a job is growing each year. On the other hand, however, many employers lamented that they are struggling to find qualified job candidates. The major reason for this mismatch is that the traditional university instruction that most graduates receive is no longer adequate for the changing demands of the new market, and employers are also failed to notice that the definition of a good job perceived by students is very different from decades ago. To address this mismatch, it is important to understand what employers want in graduates and what students are seeking in a job. By administering questionnaires to both employers and university students, we endeavor to identify the component of a good job perceived by students, and skills demanded by employers for work accomplishment. Questionnaires were administered to 250 students and 250 employers, and many differences between the two parties were identified. Suggestions were given for students, universities, and employers to narrow the talent gap between employers and university graduates.

Keywords: higher education, competences, employability, job selection

1. Introduction

Higher educational institutions have often been viewed as the center for knowledge creation and a place where a high quality labor force is produced. University graduates typically receive more opportunities on the job market and often enjoy better pay and greater chances for career promotion.

However, this situation is changing dramatically in many countries, where a bachelor's or master's degree can no longer secure a good career. Today's university graduates are forced to face the vagaries of uncertain employment, and many of them might thus become jobless after graduation (Broecke, 2013; Sharone, 2007; Ülgen, 2006).Taiwan is no exception. Its unemployment rate has increased each year in the past two decades, especially for university graduates. According to Taiwan's government, the unemployment rate for university graduates was 5.26% in 2013, which is much higher than the unemployment rate of 4.11% for individuals who only hold a high school diploma and 3.53% for those who only gain an elementary school diploma.

Ironically, "the higher the education level, the higher the unemployment rate" seemed to become a common trend in Taiwan. This phenomenon can be attributed to three major causes: the failure of the higher education policy, the global economic depression, and the accumulation of unemployed graduates in the past years. The failure of the higher education policy seemed to be the major cause for the increasing unemployment among university graduates. To ensure that all high school students have access to higher education, Taiwan's government announced an audacious educational policy—"Broadly Establishing High School and Higher Educational Institutions"—which resulted in the number of higher educational institutions expanding from about 50 in 1990 to 164 in 2010. Although the dream of offering all students an equal educational opportunity is benevolent, without a caring design, the dream has turned into a serious nightmare. Given that Taiwan is just a small island with a population much smaller than almost all other Asian countries, the dramatic expansion of higher educational institutions has hindered universities from recruiting enough students. Furthermore, Taiwan's government no longer has enough money to support such a huge expansion to its higher educational system, and

universities in Taiwan have to depend heavily on their tuition income. Thelack of students thus causes serious financial problems, which forces universities to trade the quality of education for financial stability, and this in turn deteriorates university graduates' career competences.

Another serious problem caused by the expansion of the higher educational system is that there are simply too many university graduates for the positions available in the job market. The lack of available jobs makes this problem even more essential. The global economic recession that began in 2008 crucially harmed Taiwan. As the demand for goods and services has fallen dramatically, businesses have been forced to lay off large numbers of workers to cut costs, and job creation in most industries has come to a grinding halt. Although Taiwan's government has encouraged industries to hire more new employees by providing employment subsidies, the growing number of university graduates who cannot find jobs from previous years has rapidly taken over all the new positions.

However, paradoxically, many employers lament that they are struggling to find enough qualified job candidates. They assert that most of today's university graduates no longer possess the knowledge and skills necessary for career success. Moreover, the brain-drain trend has further deteriorated the problem of the lack of qualified employees. Many of the most well-educated and intelligent university graduates are leaving for other countries, where they can find better pay and better job conditions. This has dramatically reduced the pool of qualified employees. Although many employers in Taiwan have ambitiously raised pay to attract the most talented elites, the brain-drain trend continues to deteriorate each year.

As previously mentioned, university graduates do not possess the right competences requested by employers, while employers also fail to make the right offers to attract qualified employees. Hence, it is important for university students to understand what competences are most wanted by businesses; at the same time, it is equally important for businesses to understand what university students really want in a job. This research thus endeavors to address this mismatch by answering the following three major questions:

What do students want in business? Do the factors contribute to an ideal job as perceived by students compared to that perceived by employers?

What do employers want in university graduates? Do the competences required by the job market as perceived by students differ from those perceived by employers?

What is the current competence level possessed by students? Do students and employers evaluate the competences differently?

2. Literature Review

In this sector, we first discuss the issues of employment and unemployment, with a special focus on the problems caused by unemployment. Next, we discuss how education might affect young people's employability. Thereafter, the discussion addresses how to identify an ideal job from students' and employers' perspectives. Finally, the competences requested in the job market are identified.

2.1 Employment and Employability

Employment and unemployment are complementary aspects of the same facts (Ülgen, 2006). Studies of employment focus mainly on the quality of careers and the efficiency of the workforce, while studies of unemployment often put more importance on the economic and social crises it might cause.

Unemployment can be defined as an individual being fit and willing to work, but failing to find a paid job. However, when trying to calculate the rate of unemployment, it is often difficult to identify who is willing to work and who is not; as a result, the unemployment rate is often calculated by taking the number of actually unemployed working-age individuals (registered officially) divided by the total population (Bee & Dolton, 1990).

The problem with the increasing unemployment rate among graduates is significant when a nation's economic growth and society stability are affected. Unemployment is not just a predicament for jobless individuals; more importantly, it is also a harsh challenge for the nation and society. Unemployed individuals suffer from financial losses, and the harm of non-pecuniary costs often exceeds the pecuniary cost, resulting in a loss of self-esteem, a loss of personal identity, concern about the future, a loss of purpose for living, and serious depression (Keefe, 1984; Winkelmann, 2009).

A high unemployment rate also hurts the national economy and society's stability, and the overall regional well-being is harmed by lower product outputs caused by the insufficient use of human capital. Increased social security costs, restrained purchasing power, and decreased domestic consumption of goods and services also

harm the national economy (Higgins & Porcaro, 2013). Moreover, high unemployment often causes high stress in society as people worry about losing their jobs. This stress in turn leads to an increase in stress-associated physical disease and psychological problems; in some extreme cases, those who are desperate for a basic living might turn to crime, thereby causing serious social upheaval and political crises (Levitt, 2001).

2.2 Education and Employability

The economic theory inferred that there is an inverse relationship between education and unemployment–namely, the higher the educational level, the lower the unemployment rate (Schultz, 1963). Winkelmann (2009) and Guardiola and Guillen-Royo (2014) all suggested that individuals with more social capital are sheltered from the harmful effect of unemployment; they are not only less likely to become unemployed, but they also experience a smaller well-being loss when unemployed. Ülgen (2006) also argued that, in most developing countries, the high unemployment rate often stems from the fact that the workforce is unqualified and uneducated; therefore, an investment in human capital is one of the most important strategies for decreasing unemployment.

However, the investment in human capital or expansion of the educational system is no longer the best policy for moderating the unemployment in many economically advanced countries (Barone & Ortiz, 2011). When the higher educational system is over-extended, individuals with higher academic degrees often suffer more from unemployment than others. In Taiwan, the U.K., and Greece, for example, the average unemployment duration for college graduates is longer than those with lower educational degrees (Barone & Ortiz, 2011; Ghuang, 1999). As graduate unemployment has become a major cause of social unrest and political crises in many countries, it has become one of the government's top priorities to ameliorate the harms associated with joblessness (Broecke, 2013).

Individuals with a higher educational degree were once ensured a good career after graduation; however, this is no longer true in many developed countries. A mismatch between the skills industries need and those tertiary education provides is often criticized as the major reason for exacerbating graduates' joblessness; therefore, policy-makers must tackle the high rate of unemployment among graduates by reforming educational and vocational training systems and building a stronger connection between higher educational institutions and business industries (Livanos, 2010; Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009).

2.3 Quality Career

Dean (2006) warned that, for college students to gain good jobs, they must understand what they really want in a job. Job quality has thus become an important topic in economic and social analyses for ensuring good working conditions, attracting more talented employees, and enhancing working efficiency. Boccuzzo and Gianecchini (2014) further defined job quality as the employment-related factors that have a positive effect on workers' well-being. They asserted that measuring job quality should consider both subjective perceptions and objective attributes, and all these factors can be classified into three groups: economic (hourly wage, employment relationship, contract duration),professional (horizontal educational match, vertical educational match, skill match, career advancement opportunities, teamwork, and responsibility level), and work–life balance (working hours, home–work distance).

Mau and Kopischke (2001) examined college graduates' job satisfaction and concluded that nine factors should be considered when measuring job satisfaction: good pay, good employment benefits, extending job challenges, comfortable working conditions, and opportunities for promotion, high job security, understanding supervisor, cooperative coworkers, and educational benefits. Harzing (2004) also conducted research on students' ideal jobs across 16 EU countries and indicated that 18 characteristics should be considered when trying to find an ideal job: good working relationship with direct supervisor, friendly colleagues who help each other, opportunity to balance work and private life, security of employment, opportunity to share responsibility for a task with others, little tension and stress on the job, opportunity to take full responsibility for a task, real contribution to the success of the organization, considerable freedom to adapt the employee's own approach to the job, consulted by direct superior in his/her decisions, challenging work, variety and adventure on the job, opportunity for high earnings, a prestigious and successful company, opportunity for advancement to higher level jobs, benefit to the nation and society, opportunity for helping other people, and clear rules and regulations.

Based on the identified theories, we summarized 12 major factors for an ideal job, which were classified into three dimensions: environmental dimension (good facilities and office atmosphere, ideal location, and flexible work schedule),career makeup (variety and challenges, autonomy and employee empowerment, matched to employee's interest, matched to employee's academic major), and economic dimension (profound opportunities for promotion, institutions' prestige, good welfare and benefits, good pay, and high job stability and security). The three dimensions are then used for developing the second part of the research questionnaire.

2.4 Competences Requested in the Job Market

Career competence often refers to individual attributes such as knowledge, skills, capabilities, attitude, and personalities, by which an ideal job might be acquired and retained (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Loo & Semeijn, 2004; Yorke & Knight, 2006). As employers are key players in deciding students' job search results, it is crucial to recognize the most important career competences perceived by employers (Chapin, 2004; Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010).

Garcia-Aracil and der Velden (2008) conducted research on the matches between the labor market and payoffs, where they explored six categories of career competencies: (1) organizational category (working under pressure, accuracy, time management, working independently, power of concentration); (2) field-specific category (field-specific theoretical knowledge, field-specific knowledge of methods); (3) methodological category (foreign language proficiency, computer skills, understanding organizational system, documenting ideas and information, problem-solving ability, analytical competencies, learning abilities, broad general knowledge); (4) generic category (cross-disciplinary thinking, critical thinking, oral communication skills, written communication skills, planning and coordinating); (5) participative category (economic reasoning, negotiating, assertiveness, leadership, taking responsibilities, reflective thinking); and (6) socio-emotional category (working in a team, initiative, adaptability, getting personally involved, loyalty, appreciating of different points of view). Their results indicated that the match between individual human capital competencies and the characteristics of the job is crucial.

Selvadurai, Choy, and Maros (2012) also identified 16 ideal generic skills that graduate employees should possess. They classified these 16 skills into five general categories: (1) planning and problem solving (5s, planning survey, management and administration), (2) retrieve and handle information (information technology, research skills, statistical analysis, data collection and collation), (3) communication and presentation (public relations, public speaking, subtopic), (4) social development and interaction (socially alert, customer relations, intra- and inter-organizational interactions), and (5) individual traits and attributes (self-confidence, committed, passionate). Meanwhile, Loo and Semeijn (2004) researched students' career competences and career benefits, identifying 12 crucial competencies for career success: communication skills, leadership skills, accuracy, information and communication technology skills, planning and organization activities, dealing with numbers, teamwork, dealing with changes, specialized professional knowledge, subject-specific methods and techniques, capacity for independent work, and creativity and initiative. The research results indicated that better competences might lead to better wages. However, crucial competence items vary for different segments of the labor market.

We identified 13 talents based on the aforementioned theories, classifying them into three dimensions: (1) organizational dimension (language and documents, leadership, creativity and innovation, interpersonal interactions, information and computer, teamworker); (2) field-specific dimension (field-specific operational skills, field-specific knowledge, and field-specific experiences); and (3) individual dimension (ambitious, discipline, persistence, and ethics). The third part of the research questionnaire was subsequently developed based on these 13 talents.

3. Methodology

This research aims to explore how university students and employers define the ideal job, identify the competences required in the job market, and compare the differences between students' and employers' perceptions. The following sections outline the process adopted for actualizing the identified research objectives.

3.1 Development of the Research Instruments

Two questionnaires were self-developed for data collection. The first one was adopted to explore students' perception of the ideal job and requested career competences, and the other one was used to survey employers. Both questionnaires were composed of four parts. The first part gathered data on participants' demographic information. The second part included 12 questions using a 5-point Likert scale to identify the ideal job as perceived by research participants, where 1 is extremely unimportant and 5 is extremely important. The third part comprises another 13 questions using a 5-point Likert scale to identify the most important competences required in the job market, where 1 stands for very unimportant and 5 stands for very important. Finally, the fourth part examines university students' career competence as perceived by students and employers; it includes the same 13 questions using a 5-point Likert scale as asked in the third part, although in this section 1 stands for extremely weak and 5 stands for extremely strong. As the major focus of this research is to compare the differences between university students' and employers' perceptions and to ensure that such a comparison is possible, the two research questionnaires (one for students and one for employers) shared the same questions in the second,

third, and fourth parts.

3.2 Ascertain Validity and Reliability

Both questionnaires were screened by three scholars, three employers, and three students. Only minor adjustments were made to ensure the accuracy of the contents. Cronbach's α was adopted to ensure the reliability of the students' and employers' questionnaire, showing α values of .757 and .764, respectively; thus, the reliability of both questionnaires was ensured.

Thereafter, a factor analysis was used to examine the validity of the two questionnaires. Both questionnaires showed the same grouping in the second and third parts (as the questions from the fourth part are exactly the same as in the third part, we decided not to do a factor analysis on the fourth part).

Table 1. Factor analysis of ideal jobs

	Student			Employer		
	Environment	Career Style	Economics	Environment	Career Style	Economics
Good Facilities and Atmosphere	.851			.858		
Ideal Location	.851			.836		
Flexible Schedule	.801			.718		
Variety and Challenges		.775			.786	
Employee Empowerment		.739			.551	
Very Interesting Career		.703			.803	
Match Academic Major		.671			.749	
Fast Promotion			.736			.765
Fames and Prestige			.716			.734
Good Welfare and Benefits			.694			.722
Good Pay			.667		.482	.489
Job Security and Stability			.335			.501

Table 2. Factor analysis of marketable competences

	Student			Employer		
	General	Personal	Career Specific	General	Personal	Career Specific
Language	.761			.806		
Leadership	.744			.778		
Creativity	.658			.754		
Interpersonal talents	.635			.732		
Information and Technology	.627			.650		
Team Worker	.579			.408		
Ambitious		.819			.784	
Discipline		.784			.783	
Persistence		.759			.756	
Moral and Ethics		.718			.723	

Specific Operation Skills	.849	.883
Job-Specific Knowledge	.802	.840
Job-Related Experiences	.785	.686

3.3 Sampling and Sample Distribution

The two questionnaires were administered to 250 university students and 100 employers between December 2013 and June 2014. Of these, 234 students' questionnaires and 95 employers' questionnaires were retrieved and validated, resulting in return rates of 93.6% and 95%, respectively.

Among the participants, 55% of the student participants were female and 45% were male, compared to 74% of the employer participants being male and only 26% being female. As for students' academic major and employers' career type, 27% of the student participants majored in agriculture, 27% in education and social sciences, 20% in construction and engineering, and 26% in business. On the other hand, only 12% of the employers worked in agriculture, 13% in education and arts, 35% in construction and engineering, and 40% in business.

The distributions of the sample groups were very similar to those of the population, which reflects the fact that, in Taiwan, males still dominate the director and manager positions in the job market and the majority of careers are in the business and engineering fields.

4. Research Results

4.1 Beginning Pay

An independent question about students' expected beginning annual pay was included in the first part of the students' questionnaire, and the results showed that the average expected beginning annual pay was USD 11,858. A similar question was asked on employers' questionnaire to determine how much employers will pay to hire a university graduate with general competences; the average amount was USD 10,265, which is about 15% lower than what students expected. The results indicated that students expected more, while employers wished to provide less, and it could be a serious problem when concerning young people's employability and job satisfaction.

The employers were then asked to reevaluate the beginning pay if the applicant possessed the excellent competences they requested. The average beginning pay significantly increased to USD 13,208, about 15% higher than the average beginning pay expected by students, indicating that, if students wish to have a better pay, it would be crucial for them to enhance their competences first.

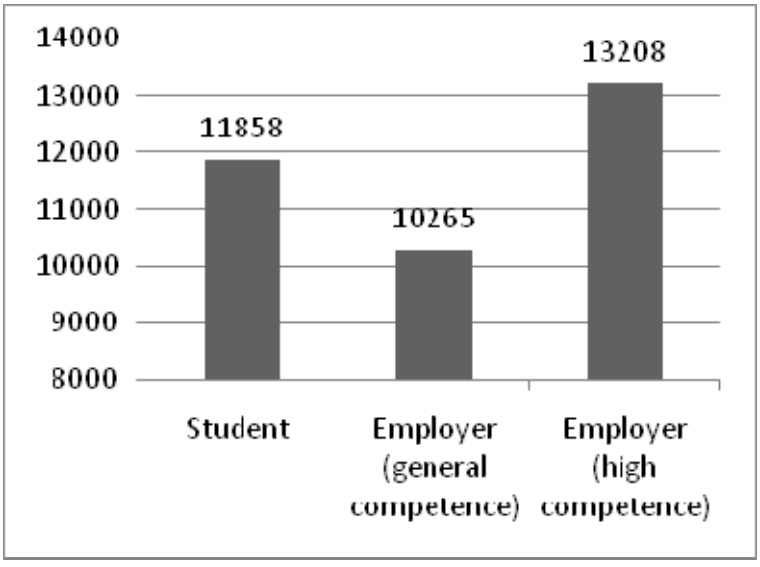

Figure 1. Beginning pay perceived by students and employers

We further conducted a comparison of the beginning pay expected by students from different academic majors and employers from different career fields. The results showed that students majoring in social sciences and arts asked for the highest beginning pay of USD 12,244, while employers in careers related to social sciences and arts wished to pay the least at USD 9,533. In other words, students majoring in social sciences and arts asked for a beginning pay approximately 30% higher than what employers wished to pay.

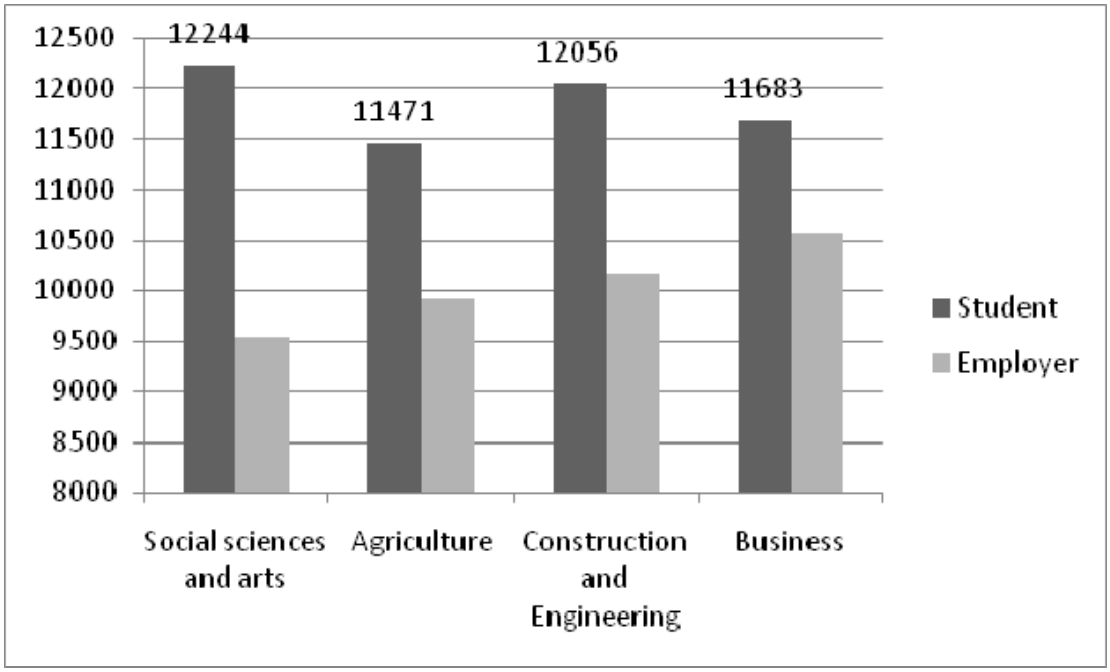

Figure 2. Beginning pay of different career types

4.2 Ideal Jobs

The second objective of this research is to identify the factors that contribute to the ideal job as perceived by students and employers. A *t*-test of the mean of two independent variables was adopted to compare the perception differences between students and employers, and the research results indicated that students valued the economic dimension significantly more than their employer counterparts. However, employers stressed the characteristics of career more than students. Although students and employers did not show significant differences on the environment dimension, when looking into the factors that contributed to each dimension, employers seemed to put much more importance on comfort of the environment than students.

Table 3. *T*-test of profession on ideal job

Dimension	Profession	Average	t	sig
Economics	Employer	4.101	3.684	.000
	Student	3.861		
Characteristics	Employer	3.829	-3.937	.000
	Student	4.138		
Environment	Employer	3.881	-1.940	.054
	Student	4.049		

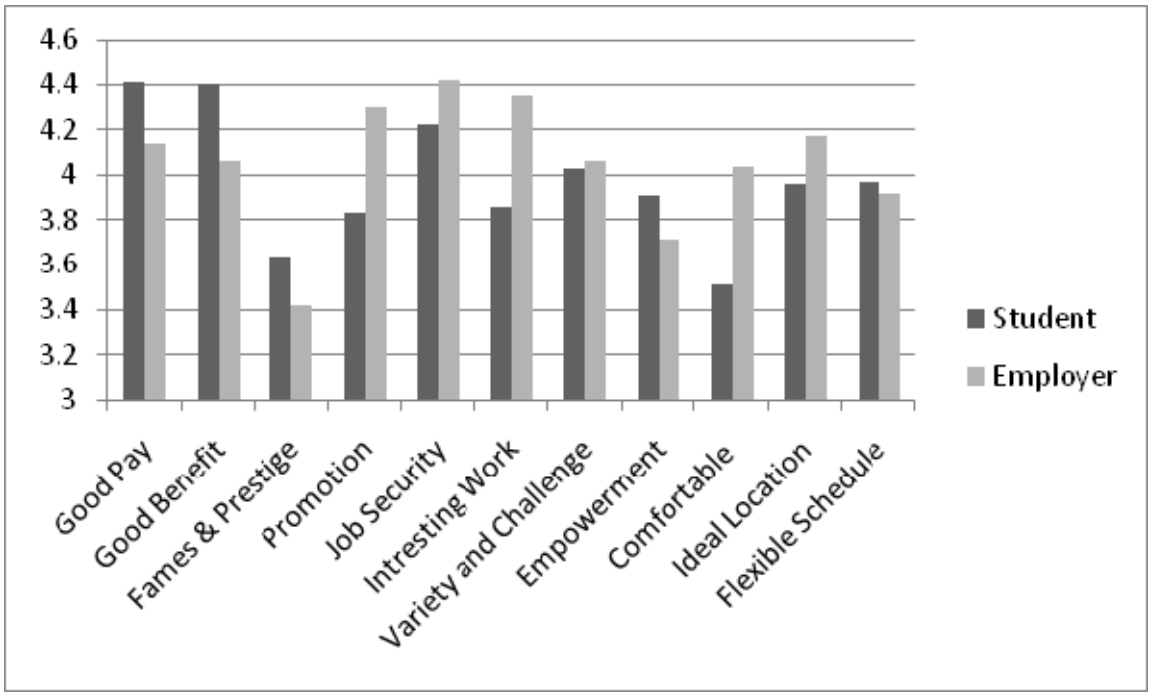

Figure 3. Characteristics of ideal job

4.3 Competence Requested in the Job Market

The third part of the questionnaire was used to understand the gap between students' and employers' perceptions of the major competences required in the job market. The research results showed that students stressed the general competence dimension more, which comprised language and communication competence and information and technological competences, while employers put more importance on the personality dimension.

Table 4. Perceptionof competence importance

Dimension	Profession	Average	T	sig
General Competence	Employer	4.076	-2.433	.016
	Student	4.242		
Career-Specific Competence	Employer	4.239	.461	.645
	Student	4.204		
Personality	Employer	4.584	3.446	.001
	Student	4.369		

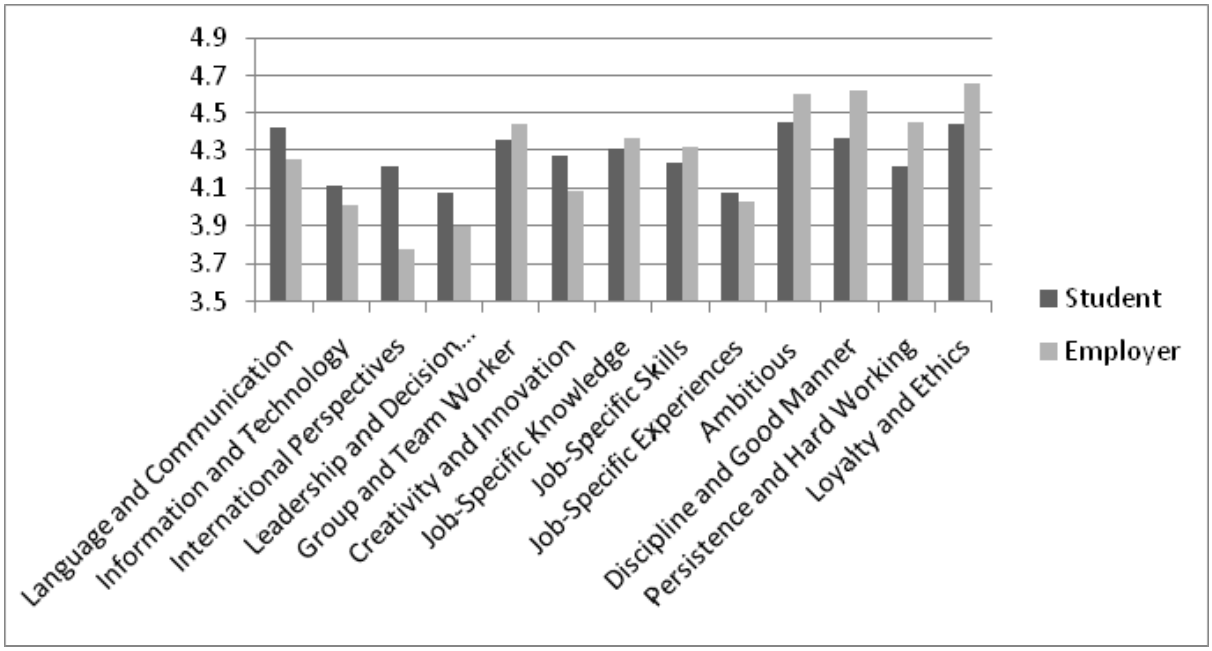

Figure 4. Perception of competence importance

4.4 Competence Level of the Students

The last part of the questionnaire is used to compare the concurrent competence possessed by college students perceived by students and employers. It is interesting to note that the competence level perceived by students was much higher than that perceived by employers almost across the board (information and technology was the only competence item valued more by employers than students). This result revealed a serious problem in that students might think that they were ready for the job market, while employers believe that students do not possess the competences required in the workplace; this would deter employers from hiring newly graduated college students, which in turn contributed to the increase of the unemployment rates.

Table 5. *T*-test of students' perception of competence level

Dimension	Profession	Average	t	sig
General Competence	Employer	3.353	-3.082	.003
	Student	3.653		
Career-Specific Competence	Employer	3.260	-3.322	.001
	Student	3.633		
Personality	Employer	3.453	-5.533	.000
	Student	4.095		

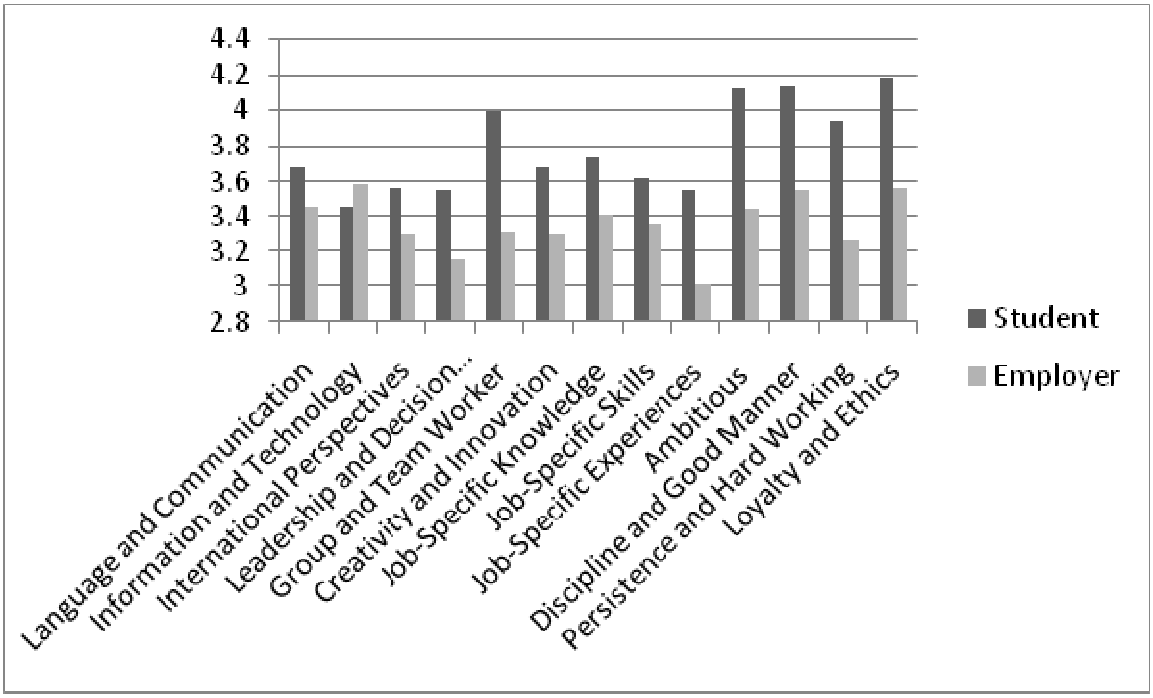

Figure 5. Perception of students' competence level

5. Conclusion and Implication

As the university graduate unemployment rate hit a record high in 2013 in Taiwan, all levels of society tried to understand the cause of this phenomenon in order to ameliorate the harm it might cause. Scholars often argue that a mismatch between the knowledge and skills achieved by university students and competences requested in the job market is one of the major reasons for unemployment. This research is thus aimed to gauge the perception gap between students and employers in terms of the factors of an ideal job, competences required in the job market, and competences currently possessed by university students.

The research results indicated that students expected a beginning payment much higher than what employers were willing to offer. It is also interesting to note that students who majored in social sciences and arts tended to expect a beginning payment much higher than all the others, while employers with a career related to social sciences and arts were willing to pay the least among all employers. This result could become a serious problem concerning young adults' employability and job satisfaction. Moreover, employers from all types of careers indicated that they would offer a much higher beginning pay if the applicants proved to have very good competences, which indicated that university graduates should try their best to strengthen their competences rather than simply complain if the aim is to have a higher beginning payment.

The research results also showed that students and employers have totally different perceptions regarding the identification of an ideal job. Students stress good pay, good benefits, and job prestige more while employers put much more importance on job security, interesting work content, opportunity for promotion, and comfortable working environment. Employers have to take this result seriously if their aim is to attract more elite and qualified students to serve in their industries.

Once again, a wide gap existed between students' and employers' perceptions when considering the competences requested in the job market. Students tended to rate the dimension of general knowledge and skills higher than employers did, while employers stressed applicants' individual personality more. Hence, if individual students wish to raise their opportunity to be employed, it is crucial for them to strengthen their competences in line with what employers stressed.

The research results indicated that students perceived their competences to be much higher than what employers perceived in almost all competence items examined in this research. This is a serious problem because if students think they are ready for the job market while employers believe that they are not, students will surely have difficulties finding a job. Therefore, it is important for students, university staff, and government officials to review and revamp their university training programs to further improve students' competences.

Finally, the research results indicated that wide perception gaps exist between students and employers in terms of the attributes of an ideal job, competences requested in the job market, and competence level of university graduates. Future studies might adopt a qualitative approach to examine how these gaps formed and strategies that might best narrow down these gaps.

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