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Quantifying the gap between graduate and employer needs in environmental management, South Africa

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Abstract

Graduate unemployment remains a significant challenge in South Africa. A shrinking economy and selective hiring practices have heightened the importance of employability skills (ESs), prompting universities to embed these in curricula as Graduate Attributes (GAs). Although Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been training environmental impact assessment professionals (EAPs) for more than 25 years, consensus on the specific knowledge areas (KAs) and skills required of graduates is lacking. There is concern about this misalignment between what HEIs provide, graduates actual competencies, and the expectations from employers. To address this gap, the study investigated the perceived importance of KAs and skills, and the extent to which they are required by South African graduates, academic institutions, and employers. Three similar online questionnaires were distributed to these groups, asking respondents to rate the importance and level of competence associated with each KA and ES using Likert scales. Results indicated that core KAs and GAs are largely incorporated into environmental management degrees. However, employers expressed a need for more specialised knowledge in certain areas. Statistical analyses revealed clear mismatches between graduate self-assessments and the expectations of academics and employers. Although all the KAs, ESs, and emotional intelligence skills were rated as important by all groups, employers perceived graduate competence to be inadequate, and graduates consistently overestimated their abilities. Improving alignment among graduates, academia, and employers could better prepare environmental management graduates to transition confidently into EAPs, register with the professional body, and contribute meaningfully to sustainable development in South Africa and globally.

Keywords: Employability Framework; Employability Skills; Environmental Impact Assessment

Practitioner; Environmental Management; Graduate Attributes; Knowledge Area