Employability of Graduates from Top-Tier University Brands in Business and Management: An Exploratory Study of Institutional Strategies and Effective Practices

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates the top-tier University brands of Pakistan in the fields of Business and Management, concerning their institutional strategies and practices which frequently enable their graduates to become more employable than the relatively low-tier University brands. For this purpose, an exploratory qualitative inquiry has been opted, and as a part of it, 13 one-on-one semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the curriculum developers, course coordinators, instructors, and trainers working at those top accredited Business and Management institutes. The data collected is then thematically analyzed for the examination of the strategies and practices opted by those institutions, and their execution process. The findings of the thematic analysis posit implications for the low-tier Business and Management Institutes that in order to ensure the maximum employability of their graduates, they need to reflect on their institutional strategies and practices regarding the four main areas: Liaising with the industry employers and experts, building enterprise skills through the development of incubation centers, developing support services, and incorporating effective pedagogical methods & activities in the curriculum. Moreover, the results portray an overall need of conducting a pedagogical review for improvising traditional teaching methods with case-based, simulation-based, and project-based learning of the Business and Management institutes of Pakistan.

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1.   Introduction

In a competitive national economic system, there is a vital role of the universities in producing quality employable human capital (De Jager, 2004; Kuzminov, Sorokin, Froumin, & Economics, 2019; Zhang, 2021). Owing to their tremendous role, the universities have recently been observed to embrace a growing trend of mass education, internationalization, privatization, vocationalism, diversification, and marketization (Butt, 2020; Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009). Nonetheless, despite all these expansions, the universities are also faced with the pressures resulting from 'decentralized centralization', a phenomenon which refers to a unique status that is a combination of institutional autonomy with institutional accountability to educational stakeholders i.e. parents, students, government, employers (Paul Blackmore, Bulaitis, Jackman, & Tan, 2016). The educational stakeholders view the core responsibility of a country's universities as instilling an economically useful knowledge, skills, and attributes Van Laar, Van Deursen, Van Dijk, and De Haan (2019) which leads to market penetration of their passing out graduates and promises them sustainable employment opportunities (Kuzminov et al., 2019). Certainly, this requires universities to plan on interventions to prepare their students and polish their characteristics and attitudes before they transition to actual workplaces (Bano & Vasantha, 2019). In realization of this, a recent trend in research has been observed regarding how higher education can contribute to maximum employability of the graduates and enhance a country's

socio-economic development (Penn, 2016). As a matter of fact, graduate Employability has become the most widely used popular proxy measure to evaluate a university's performance (Cheng, Adekola, Albia, & Cai, 2022; Chitra, 2021). This depicts that the value of university education will be determined only by the quality of the employable human capital that it produces (Kuzminov et al., 2019; Selvadurai, Ah Choy, & Maros, 2012; Zhang, 2021).

It has been observed that the graduates from the reputed institutes achieve better job opportunities, job security, and higher income levels Bano and Vasantha (2019) as compared to less recognized institutes. The all-time employers' choice of graduates from reputed institutes lies in the fact that all that the industry needs is a performer who is apt at the skills (Butt, 2020), and it is presumed that graduates from top-tier university brands are a valuable addition in organizational human capital since they bring in a polished skill set (Nadeem, 2021) and personal capital which guarantees their success in the labor market (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett, & Richardson, 2019). In fact, a university's brand name is acknowledged as a powerful predictor of a graduate's prior experiences with knowledge, investment of time and money, and experience with the right people and further ensures one's credibility, level of competitiveness, and if one can be trusted with a new job (Bano & Vasantha, 2019). This has led to an understanding that a university's repute and ranking are essential credentials for a fresher in securing their first job in Pakistan (Nadeem, 2021). Numerous other researchers like that of Bano and Vasantha (2019) have illustrated that graduate employment prospects are influenced by the image of the institute, institutional ranking, program structure of the institute, and image projection of a university brand. Not only does a university brand affect an employer's perception of the employability of an individual, but also, as Jackson (2010) and Bano and Vasantha (2019) state, even the graduates' self-perception of their employability is affected by the institute they attend. Therefore, the students now make a conscious and dedicated effort to get themselves admitted to an institute that guarantees them employment and competitive advantage (Bano & Vasantha, 2019). As such, they seek a university experience that polishes their employability attributes (Jackson, 2010; Kuzminov et al., 2019; Van Laar et al., 2019; Zhang, 2021).

Hence selecting an institute has become a matter of strategic importance in the modern era where changing employment patterns, and new labor markets and employment trends are witnessed on regular basis (Boahin, 2018). Certainly, this has induced a new level of skills' requirements in the industries (Buntat, Jabor, Saud, Mansor, & Mustaffa, 2013; Kuzminov et al., 2019; Mansour & Dean, 2016; McCabe, 2010). Surely, employers have shifted their concern from attaining qualified graduates to seeking graduates with marketable (Raza & Naqvi, 2011) and applied academic skills. These skills may include applied scientific and social sciences concepts, mathematical calculations, and other skills, such as communication, which could be applied to real-life situations (Zinser, 2003). Indubitably, the infusion of such employability attributes requires a rigorous effort by the institutions to incorporate the generic and technical skills needed by the industry (Zhao & Kularatne, 2020) in their curriculums. This has been comprehensively explained by McCabe (2010) who asserted that in order to accomplish the employability agenda with the given complexities and changes in the operating environment of the businesses, it is important for the Universities to tailor their teaching and learning practices, and curriculums, to innovate and engage with the professionals, communities, and environment, capitalize on their strengths, and, last but not least, keep up with a practice of self-appraisal so as to ensure employability of their graduates. As a matter of fact, the Universities which develop knowledge and skillsets for their human capital (Cheng et al., 2022; Chitra, 2021) on the parameters of global education and skills' trainings (Mansour & Dean, 2016) manage to stay as the top-tier University-brand. These universities constantly keep an eye on the changing skills' demands in the industry and improvise their curriculums and educational interventions to enhance the employment of their graduates (De Jager, 2004; Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009; Jonck, 2014; Little & McMillan, 2014; McCabe, 2010).

On the other hand, several Universities across the globe fail to realize the importance of graduate skills in their agenda to create an employable yield of graduates for the knowledge economy (Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009). Particularly, they overlook market insight while designing their curriculums, educational practices, and interventions. Consequently, the students, who are not educated with a focus on an employability skills specific curriculums and educational interventions, face a crisis of market penetration and retention of their current jobs (Selvadurai, Ah Choy, & Maros, 2012). Thus, despite heavy investment in education, the return on such investments has dropped in the form of low graduate employability levels (Chitra, 2021;

Kuzminov et al., 2019). This has led to a contemporary debate, about the efficacy of Higher Education Institutions, which has been documented by various researchers, that the graduates' failure to progress in their careers and avail employment opportunities are the results of the academic institutions' failure to design skills-based curriculums and pedagogical methods, and ensure their implementation (Selvadurai, Ah Choy, & Maros, 2012). Although the Higher Education Institutes in Pakistan are thriving with regard to their offering (Butt, 2020), only a small number of Business and Management Universities are particularly focused on ensuring the maximum employability of their graduates through proper practices and academic interventions. Accordingly, the employability outcomes of the top-tier Business and Management institutes are comparatively higher as compared to the low-tier Business and Management institutes. Given that, the current study aims to examine the institutional strategies and practices of the top-tier Business and Management institutes which enable their graduates to become more employable than the graduates from other such institutes, especially in the current times when the competition among the Business and Management graduates has increasingly become severe (Packianathan & Narayanan, 2014). Therefore, the main research question posed for this study is: What are the institutional strategies and best practices which enhance the employability outcomes of the top-tier Business and Management Institutes of Pakistan? In order to answer this research question, an exploratory qualitative inquiry has been deployed. As a part of this, interviews with those curriculum developers, course coordinators, instructors, and trainers have been conducted who work at the accredited top-tier Business and Management institutions of Pakistan. On the whole, all of this has been done to explicitly reflect on the concept of institutional employability, and articulate about the best practices and strategies which are deployed by the top-tier Business and Management institutions of Pakistan to deliver better employability outcomes.

2. Literature Review

There are a lot of channels through which the idea of assuring the graduates' employability is cultivated in the Universities (Zhang, 2021).

Figure 1: Employability skills wheel (UKCES, 2009, p.17) (as mentioned by Paul Blackmore et al. (2016).
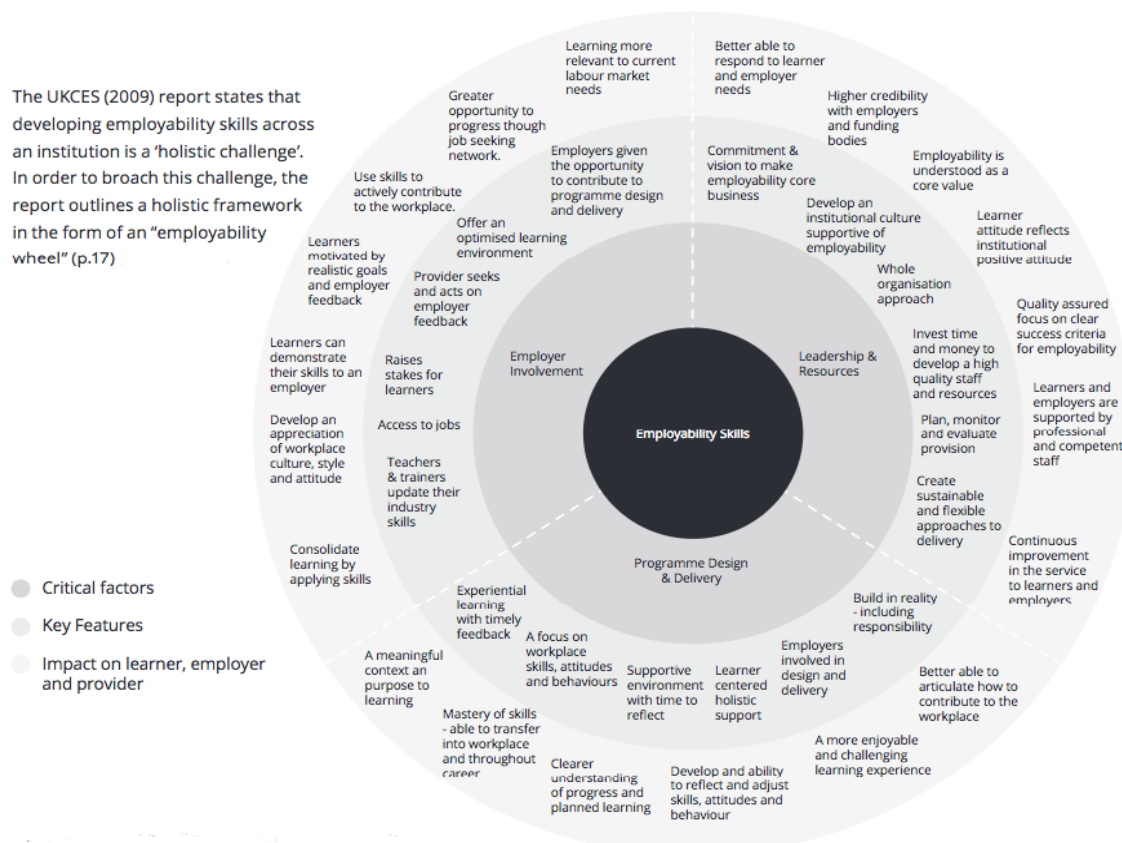
P Blackmore (2015) illustrated the critical success factors, with the help of which the institutes deliver their overall employability strategy, such as the institutes' internationalization

strategy, education strategy, communication and marketing strategy, alumni relations strategy, and research and knowledge transfer strategy. Moreover, the key components for holistically executing employability services at the institutional level have been comprehensively expressed, at a report by the UK's Commission for Employability and Skills (UKCES), in the form of an 'Employability Skills Wheel' (Paul Blackmore et al., 2016). Figure 1 typically shows that 'Employability Skills Wheel'. The circles in the wheel portray critical and high-impact factors for the inculcation of employability skills. For example, the 'inner circle' of 'critical factors' is comprised of 'employer involvement', 'leadership and resources', and 'program design and delivery', the middle circle portrays the key features of the critical factors, and the outermost circle depicts their impact on the employer, learner, and provider.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In order to ascertain the institutional strategies and best practices regarding the matter of graduates' employability, the study incorporates exploratory inquiry with the utilization of one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

3.2. Population and Sample

In order to target the population of the study, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan's website was accessed, and as per the HEC's ranking of the Business Schools, the top five Business and Management Institutes, including Iqra University Karachi, Lahore School of Economics, Institute of Business Administration (IBA) Karachi and Sukkur, Institute of Management Sciences (IMS) Peshawar, and Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology (SZABIST) were selected to source the respondents. According to the HEC's institutional ranking formula, all of these institutes score above 75. The respondents of this study were limited to 13 curriculum experts and developers, course coordinators, instructors, and trainers from these top-tier accredited Business and Management Institutions. All of these respondents were reached by following the technique of snowball sampling. The selection of these subjects was also based on the fact that they all were the key employability stakeholders because of their job of instilling and infusing employability skills in the University graduates through various academic interventions. Moreover, all of these respondents were teaching during the academic year of 2020-2021. However, more respondents fell under the initial years (i.e., 1-5 years), in terms of their work experience. The study is restricted to the Business and Management faculty only, particularly in terms of its scope and implications, as researchers like Green, Hammer, and Star (2009) believed that employability attributes for graduates are discipline specific. In other words, they require specific set of curriculum and educational interventions.
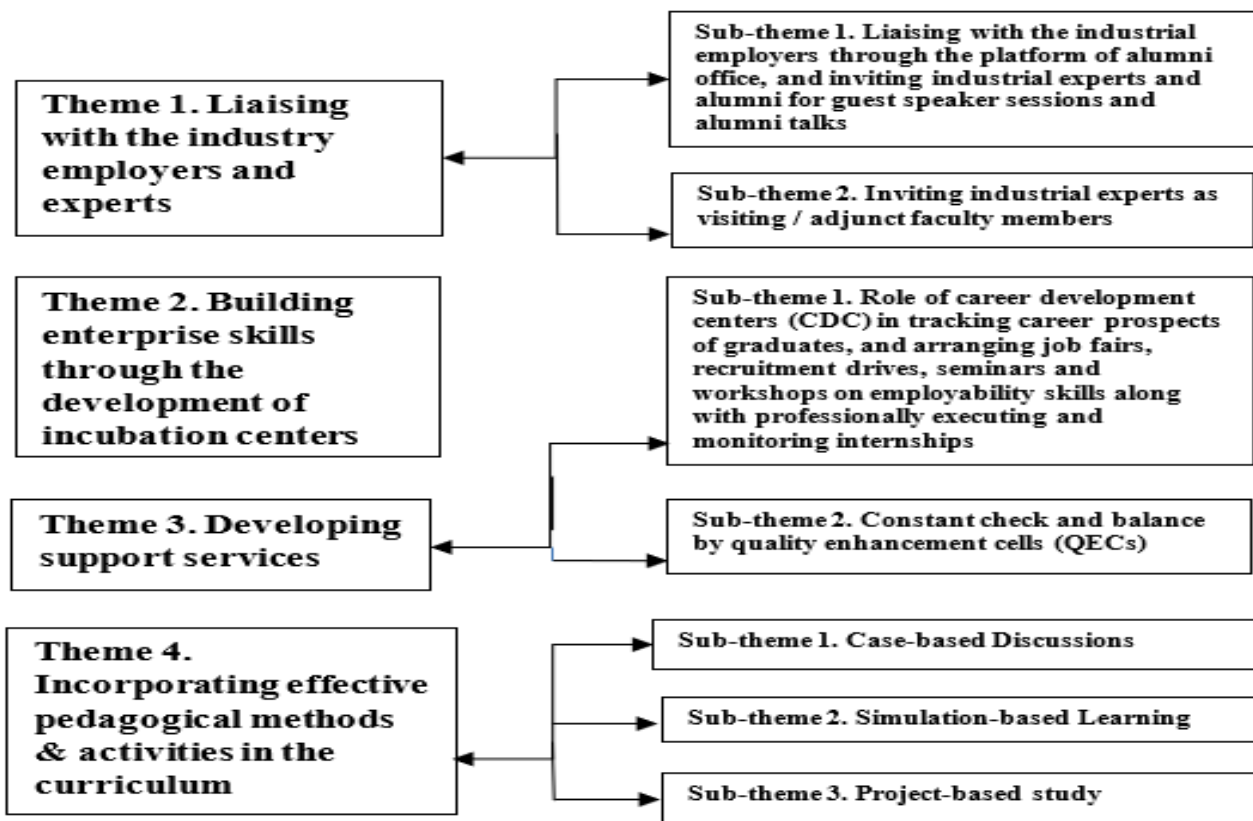
3.3. Data Collection Instrument

The semi-structured interview questions were adapted from a questionnaire by Jackson (2010) which involved discussions concentrated on the strategies used by the highly proficient curriculum experts, developers, coordinators, instructors, and trainers to enhance the employability skills of the graduates so that they may eventually contribute to the overall employability outcomes of the institutes.

4. Findings and Analysis

The data, collected through semi-structured interviews, was analyzed with the use of thematic analysis technique. For this purpose, Braun and Clarke (2006) approach to thematic analysis was adopted since it provides a very flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting themes within a data corpus. Largely, this method is based on establishing elaborative discussions of the respondents' views, and then the researcher systematically reaches to the interpretation of the data through a process of identifying patterns or themes within that dataset. Likewise, in the current study, the analysis was broadly undertaken by combining the units of information, 'codes', into themes. In particular, this was done with the considerable assessment of the similar codes to finalize the sub-themes. Further, the correlation among the similar sub-themes addressing certain best-practice and academic interventions leading to employability outcomes for the graduates were then grouped under the main theme. The entire method of reaching to codes, sub-themes, and themes was an iterative process that involved reading and re-reading the interviews' transcripts. This is made evident at the flowchart in Figure 2 which is, in fact, a visual representation of a cognitive map, to enable linkages and allow connections among the sub-themes and themes. Finally, the following themes

were emerged: Theme 1-Liaising with the industry employers and experts, Theme 2-Building enterprise skills through the development of incubation centers, Theme 3-Developing support services, and Theme 4- Incorporating effective pedagogical methods & activities in the curriculum.

Figure 2: The thematic framework of the Study

Theme 1. Liaising with the industry employers and experts	**Sub-theme 1. Liaising with the industrial employers through the platform of alumni office, and inviting industrial experts and alumni for guest speaker sessions and alumni talks**
	Sub-theme 2. Inviting industrial experts as visiting / adjunct faculty members
Theme 2. Building enterprise skills through the development of incubation centers	**Sub-theme 1. Role of career development centers (CDC) in tracking career prospects of graduates, and arranging job fairs, recruitment drives, seminars and workshops on employability skills along with professionally executing and monitoring internships**
Theme 3. Developing support services	**Sub-theme 2. Constant check and balance by quality enhancement cells (QECs)**
Theme 4. Incorporating effective pedagogical methods & activities in the curriculum	**Sub-theme 1. Case-based Discussions**
	Sub-theme 2. Simulation-based Learning
	Sub-theme 3. Project-based study

Theme 1: Liaising with the Industrial Employers and Experts

This theme portrays the importance of industrial linkages. In this regard, the research of Paul Blackmore et al. (2016) acknowledged the employers' involvement as the key element for building a holistic approach to institutional employability. The industrial linkages can be established through maintaining an adequate alumni relations strategy. Accordingly, illustrating the multi-faced approaches which may be utilized for expanding the alumni relations, an important statement appeared, by one of the interviewees, as follows:

"……. We do a multifold activity for the engagement with the industry…. We offer consultancy services and refresher courses for professionals, and we have formally established programs like that of Executive Education which has recently become a new way of linking with the corporate world. In a typical 2-3 days executive education program, we can gather 15-20 industrial experts as alumni…At times, alumni also get benefited from us when they need consultancy. Recently the head of the strategy of XYZ bank came to our institute for consultancy. Although before coming to us, they had taken consultancy from McKinsey & Company, still they considered that we could be a good resource for data collection from branches located in interior Sindh. So, we have tried to develop a two-way process of collaboration between the university and the industry……" (3rd Interviewee)

Paul Blackmore et al. (2016) have also mentioned about this aspect of expanding alumni relations in their study. For example, they asserted that Universities provide opportunities for various refresher courses and other continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for their alumni as a key strategy to pave long-term relationships with them (Paul Blackmore et al., 2016).

Another interviewee stated the other key methods for building the relationships with the alumni, such as alumni talks, and the statement goes:

"….. In our institute, alumni dinners are the most sought-after sessions. The Career Office arranges 2-3 alumni talks each semester. Sometimes, the Alumni Office invites the oldies for campus visits. At IBA, we often witness alumni from the 1980s who are accompanied by the representatives of the alumni office to show them the campus. So, when the alumni are invited for alumni talks, these seasoned industrial experts share their knowledge, success journeys, challenges and failures, and act as role models for the novice. Moreover, they bring in a direct market exposure to the Universities, and so the students come to know about the new industrial trends through them. Similarly, they also facilitates the teachers in identifying employers' expectations, and the gaps between job market and curriculum….." (12th Interviewee)

Likewise, some views of instructors and trainers also reflected that alumni dinners are an ideal opportunity for establishing networking in the industry. In this regard, an important comment appeared:

"….In the alumni talk and guest speaker sessions with industrial experts, the students get a chance to develop linkages and contacts with the experts over tea and meal breaks. Sometimes, our alumni also present to them their success stories at the alumni dinners which has recently been referred as 'industry presentation night' at our institute. The alumni are also invited to the launch ceremonies of various practical and innovative ideas of our students. This acts as a prototype testing of their ideas in front of industrial experts……" (2nd Interviewee)

The most eminent aspect of industry presentations was recognized with regard to how they act as a platform to let the students know about different organizations which may offer them employment opportunities for entry-level jobs and internships. Luca and Heal (2007) have also recognized the importance of such presentations and their benefits. Hence commenting on how alumni pave the path for better employment opportunities, a respondent claimed:

"…..Alumni networks bear fruits for us in two ways. One, they represent our University brand, and spread positive word of mouth. Second, alumni give back to their alma mater by finding placements for their graduates and interns. Also, when the students appear for the job interviews, and the interviewers are the alumni of the same institution as the students, then naturally it generates a soft corner in the hearts of the interviewers for the selection of such students….." (13th Interviewee)

Furthermore, another important strategy for maintaining liaising with the industrial employers was found to be hiring industrial experts and practitioners as the visiting faculty in the Universities. A comment made by one of the respondents suggests this idea, and it is stated as follows:

"…..When we teach Retailing, we make sure that we hire a visitor who has a prior hands-on experience of retailing at the mega retail stores, such as Hyperstar,Carrefour, Imtiaz, and others in Pakistan. Then…. it is often somebody from the Islamabad Stock Exchange who is teaching Finance courses at NUST….One of our visiting Professors quite often appear on the daily talk shows at the national television, and discusses the economy of Pakistan…He was also nominated for the position of the finance minister of the country. This makes it evident that we bring in high-caliber people for our visiting courses, and this way our graduates get an opportunity to be trained and updated with the current knowledge. Other than this, recently we have developed a hybrid practice of teaching in which some part of the course is taught by the industry expert and some part is taught by the regular faculty...." (10th Interviewee)

The findings under this theme are aligned with (Butt, 2020) assertion that Universities should be more focused on building professional networks through their continuous initiatives like guest speaker lectures, project work, and panel workshop sessions. The benefits of these sessions coincide with the assertion of Luca and Heal (2007) who stated that when guest speakers are invited from industry and government, they bring exposure of the market trends and requirements, industry standards and protocols, career prospects and opportunities, and real-world examples about successful startups and pitfalls. Similarly, this helps build professional networks between academia and industry. Overall, this theme portrays that the most viable practices and approaches to liaising with the Industrial employers in top-tier Business and Management Institutes are a) inviting industrial experts for guest speaker sessions and alumni talks, and b) inviting industrial experts for the visiting / adjunct faculty positions.

Theme 2. Building Enterprise Skills through the Development of Incubation Centers

The second theme portrays the functionality and importance of incubation centers in building entrepreneurship and enterprise skills in students. This skill was highlighted as a key competitive advantage for the graduates of the top-tier Business and Management institutes as it is believed to make them more employable.

In view of this, an interviewee discussed about the top-notch incubation centers functioning across the country in various Universities:

"…..I believe that entrepreneurship and enterprise skills can be developed in the people. I can see that in the future, the concept of Business Schools will vanish, and incubation centers will take the lead. LUMS has a very effective National Incubation Centre which operates for the whole country. NUST's Science and Technology Park promotes the growth of hi-tech and innovation-led germination. The COMSATS University Incubator 1 (which is also known as the Cubator 1ne) provides a platform for expert advice, resource mobilization, and networking opportunities to the students. All these incubation centers serve as a much-needed bridge between academia and industry….." (5th Interviewee)

Similarly, another respondent commented about the process and functioning of an incubation center in launching and executing a business plan:

"……Our incubation center provides both platform and helpful environment for channelizing the promising business plans. When the students launch their business plan, at an incubation center for a start-up, to win, they get the advantage from the linkages of the incubation center with the market, industry, chamber of commerce, and financial institutions. The incubation center also provides trainings through various workshops on various topics, such as sources of financial assistance, online marketing, matters of legal nature for registering a business. Moreover, we plan workshops on management styles of various business tycoons, such as Jack Ma, through our incubation center, and promote ideas on entrepreneurial mindsets. Quite often, such workshops are sponsored by the chamber of commerce or other national and international organizations. For example, we have recently collaborated with the Technical and Vocational Education and Training institute of our city. In addition, we also provide marketing channels and product launch ideas to the students through our incubation center while the ideas which actually sustain are often provided by our sponsors. Therefore, executing and accelerating a new business with the help of the incubation center lead the students to learn several aspects of that business, which, in turn, assist them in ethical and commercial execution of it….." (1st Interviewee)

In addition, several other interviewees highlighted the importance of executing a business plan through an incubation center for the refinement of business ideas. For example, one interviewee commented:

"…..We have a strong team at our incubation center which guides our students on the practicality of the ideas they propose. Certainly, the requirements of every business vary as per the nature of the sector to which it belongs. For example, healthcare sector, information technology sector, tourism sector, textile sector, etc., all these sectors are unique, and so pose different requirements to be met by the start-ups. We have experts working at the incubation centers who are there to refine the ideas, and, provide feedback and expertise to the students, in case of any bottleneck. So, the students get their ideas refined which save them both time and money……" (6th Interviewee)

Altogether, the findings under this theme highlight the professional services and resources offered by the Universities' incubation centers which assist the students in crafting and polishing their business ideas and projecting them to the market. Thus, the incubation centers are realized as an intermediary body for bridging the linkages between the Universities and the industry. In other words, they can be called a hub for industrial linkages which enhance the social capital of the Business and Management institutes.

Theme 3. Developing Support Services

This theme portrays the significance of the support services of Career Development Centers (CDC), Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), and the services of Students' Counseling Centers in shaping the employability potential and prospects of students. Nonetheless, a majority of the respondents did not consider that the QECs and Students' Counseling Centers are making as much of a direct addition to the employability of the graduates.

Illustrating the functionality of the career offices (operating at the Universities) with regard to tracking the employability prospects of the students, an interviewee commented:

"…..Our career office deploys professional advisers who discuss with the students their career options and prospects. Each student is guided for the best-case scenarios, less favorable circumstances, and even the worst-case scenarios of the employment. Moreover, at LUMS Business School, we already specify big companies for the employment of our passing-out graduates, such as P&G, Telenor, Unilever, Pakistan Tobacco Company, etc. Moreover, our career counselors guide our graduates regarding their decisions of joining a company and the salary packages they should be demanding….." (7th Interviewee)

Another useful aspect of the CDC which was discussed by the respondents is the arrangement of seminars and workshops. This has been also been identified by Van Laar et al. (2019) who illustrated that training regarding knowledge, skills, and abilities enables a graduate to grab a work opportunity, avail promotions, elevate in career, and switch job for progress. With regard to this, a respondent also stated:

"……The graduates of LUMS are supposed to formulate their Curriculum Vitae on specific templates for which they are offered workshops on CV writing. Other than this, we plan several workshops on various employability skills, such as work ethics, professional grooming, entrepreneurial skills, and so forth through the forum of our CDC." (15th Interviewee)

Furthermore, concerning the career offices' efforts for executing various exchange programs, only two-course coordinators among thirteen interviewees described exchange programs as an essential employability strategy opted by the CDCs. The rest of the respondents did not consider any significance of exchange programs, and their arguments were in line with the fact that in the job market, the employers may potentially be more interested in the explicit employability attributes of the graduates rather than their general exposure. However, those two interviewees who endorsed the idea of exchange programs as a viable strategy to enhance the employability potential of the graduates believed that their CDCs systematically execute the MOUs with different organization for those exchange programs. For example, one of the two respondents mentioned:

"…… We have a very systematic plan for the execution of the MOUs with different organizations for our exchange programs. For any exchange program, such as our summer internship program, we mainly rely on our MOUs with different organizations or companies…..So, we count our MOUs in the consideration of how many students of ours would be entertained by a single organization with whom we have signed an MOU, who will take care of our students at those organizations, and what would be the financial liability of the concerned parties (in case, if there is any). Our MOU office frequently discards or renews the dead MOUs. After every three months, the MOU office delivers a presentation at the Rector's office about the number of MOUs which have been signed, the number of dead MOUs which have been renewed, and the number of MOUs which have been cancelled or discarded…." (9th Interviewee)

However, a number of interviewees strongly pronounced the role of their CDCs, without the involvement of the MOUs with other organizations, for arranging Internship opportunities for their students. In fact, CDCs were highlighted as mediators between the employers and the interns by a majority the respondents. Thus, it appeared that most of the respondents commended their CDCs' services for professionally executing and monitoring Internships which they believed enable their interns in creating value for themselves, and learn several employability skills, during their internship experience. Emphasizing on how professional execution of Internships, is essential for the skills-acquisition of the students, during their internship experiences, a respondent stated:

"….Our internships are well planned to accomplish profound learning outcomes for the students…..We prepare week-wise learning outcomes, for those 3-4 weeks of Internships, for our students. At the end of their Internships, we receive their evaluation score (out of 100), from the employer, on the planned learning outcomes, via courier. This score is then credited to the students' academic progress. The students are also required to appear for their Internships' viva involving the industry experts from the same industry where they have had their Internships, for another 100 marks, after the completion of their Internships, which are also credited to their academic progress….." (1st Interviewee)

In addition, adding to the idea of the learning outcome of the Internship programs, a professor commented:

"…. In this era of IT, I am more focused on the learning aspects, such as what new software our interns have learned during their Internships. So, for me, this is an important learning outcome one should achieve after an Internship. In other words, from a Human Resource Intern, I would be interested to know what software he/she has learned regarding performance management, compensation, gamification, etc……" (3rd Interviewee)

Also, it was highlighted by one of the interviewees that in order to polish job-seeking skills, CDC has recently developed an important practice of mock interviews, and the details of the practice are stated below by that interviewee:

"…... We recently invited some representatives of the recruiting agencies, through our CDC, to conduct mock interviews for our final year students. They all had immense experience in shortlisting and hiring the suitable candidates. At the end of each mock interview, they provided feedback to the students for improvement….." (11th Interviewee)

Other than this, it was noticed from the respondents' statements that the CDCs of the top-tier Business and Management institutes facilitated various extracurricular activities as an important strategy for engaging students throughout their study program to polish their employability skills. Paul Blackmore et al. (2016) have termed them as 'bolt-on activities'. Hence these are the non-credited academic and non-academic activities, such as workshops, extracurricular activities, optional courses, etc. which essentially polish the employability skills of the graduates.

In this regard, one of the respondents stated:

"……We make sure that our students' learning experiences are comprised of both basic domains of the discipline, and outside of the basic domains. One way of achieving the latter is through extracurricular activities. For example, our different clubs and student societies play a pivotal role in enhancing the confidence, creativity, and other skillsets of the students. Likewise, a lot of skills, such as event management are learned by the students through their involvement in different activities, such as industrial visits, sports, other extracurricular activities associated with different clubs and student societies, etc….." (4th Interviewee)

Two of the pioneer researchers on employability, Yorke and Knight (2006) have also attributed a sound impact of co-curricular activities on students' employability. These activities enable the students to learn and explore the social and cultural capital of a University (Norton & Carroll, 2015). Similarly, the socialization resulted through these experiences, in turn, induces an important influence on the students' employability attributes (Selvadurai, Ah Choy, & Maros, 2012).

Similarly, a response of an interviewee was also noted in this study, with regard to the involvement of students in the Universities' activities related to the environment protection:

"…. Recently, in our green-campus initiative, we have taught our students about the significance of tree plantations and taking care of them. This was followed by several campus cleaning initiatives and other interventions like waste recycling…..By involving students in these activities, we enable them learn a lot of generic skills, such as team working, conflict and negotiation, emotional intelligence, self-management and organization, and several other

attributes. If we don't involve students in such activities, they may have to learn them through various on-the-job assignments, which may be damaging for their employment as they may initially find themselves unfit for those activities…..” (9th Interviewee)

It was also highlighted that the socialization and competition due to various co-curricular activities at inter and intra University levels serve as a key channel for marketing the employability of the graduates of the top-tier Universities. Therefore, it was acknowledged as their effective strategy to enhance inter-institutional connectivity with the other Business and Management institutes, organizations, and companies. Given that, a respondent stated:

“…. We won the second position in the recently held 'Young Entrepreneur Summit' (YES), Chapter 2, and we stood out among 12 Business Schools / Institutes. Such events promote the entrepreneurial spirit among students in a true sense….” (10th Interviewee)

On the other hand, Paul Blackmore et al. (2016) argued that it is the responsibility of the career office to collaborate with industries, SMEs, recruitment agencies, and alumni for the job drives and the extracurricular activities associated to it for the students.

Furthermore, one of the interviewees highlighted the positive role of Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) at the University in tracking the employment related progress of the graduates:

"Our QEC keeps a survey check, after every six months, for the employment status of the passed-out graduates. It also tracks if our Curriculum is updated and aligned with the local/international/global job markets' trends. This strong role of QEC leads to an employable yield of the graduates who quickly attain the status of employment at different job markets.…” (Interviewee 4)

Apart from the supporting role of the CDCs and QECs, one respondent discussed the importance of students' advisory/wellbeing/counseling/enabling centers in shaping the employability potential of the graduates. The respondent proclaimed:

“…..Every student has differing needs, aims, motivations, and journeys which require a customized set of guidance and support. I feel that the students' enabling centers are very important for improving the employability potential of the graduates…..” (1st Interviewee)

Nevertheless, the role of students' advisory/wellbeing/counseling/enabling centers was not considered as significant as that of the CDCs and QECs by a majority of the interviewees for bridging the employability skills gap of the graduates.

Theme 4: Incorporating Effective Pedagogical Methods & Activities in the Curriculum
When asked about whether employability skills were embedded in the curriculum or whether they were provided as a bolt-on provision, a majority of the respondents stated that the employability skills were mainly embedded in the curriculum through learning approaches and teaching methods like Case-based discussions, Simulations, and Project-based study. A couple of interviewees also highlighted the significance of these pedagogical methods for enhancing the employability skills of the graduates. Moreover, a majority of respondents mentioned that their graduates stand out from the graduates of the rest of the Universities because of their presentation skills, the eloquence of communication in English, and analytical and critical thinking skills. Elaborating the role of teaching methods for polishing these skills, a response by an interviewee was observed as follows:

“…. We cannot rely on Books only. Although they provide a good theoretical basis to understand the contextual application of concepts, we keep a strong focus on Case-based method for inculcating business problem solving, decision making, judgmental ability, analytical skills, and critical thinking in our students…. Hence a teacher is just a moderator between the ones who defend the case and the ones who oppose the case. With this experience, students adopt the habit of defending their points with reasonable logic, which, in turn, helps them in answering the situational and behavioral questions during their job interviews…..” (2nd Interviewee)

Similarly, elaborating on the purpose of the case study method for developing higher-order thinking skills in the pupil, one of the instructors stated:

"…..In the field of Management Sciences, we do not have hundred percent definite answers, so we can easily opt for cases…..For example, specific motivation theory may be taught, but it may not be applicable to all motivational situations. Similarly, there are a lot of concepts which require a subjective and contextual application. Another example can be, how can you teach someone to measure trust? Since trust is an abstract notion, and there is no absolute criterion to measure it, one needs to be reasonably subjective and contextual to explain and measure it…..So, the entire purpose of case study method of teaching is to build higher-order thinking among the students….." (8th Interviewee)

Other than the case-based method, the respondents proclaimed simulation-based learning as a popular active teaching method too. With regard to this, one of the interviewees affirmed:

"We also have the option of computer-based simulation learning so that the students may build their reflections based on the hands-on experience with the real-world. We call such simulation exercises, 'serious games'. The difference between case study and simulation-based learning is the fact that in the case study method, there is no right or wrong answer, and students evaluate the given information to arrive at a reasonable answer. On the other hand, in simulations, you get the information from the computer. Data and problems are given to you like a game, and you get the results of your decisions there and then……" (12th Interviewee)
On further inquiry, regarding software used for such simulations, it was stated by another respondent:

"……In Pakistan, we do not use indigenous simulations. All the simulations we commonly use at LUMS and UMT, are foreign-made. Most of the simulations are from Harvard Business School, and, an organization from France, StratX Simulations. All of these simulations are very expensive to build. So, unfortunately, Universities or organizations in Pakistan do not build such simulations……." (6th Interviewee)

One of the respondents also discussed the essence of using such advance pedagogical methods for enhancing the students' 'curiosity to learn':

"…. Eagerness to learn and the curiosity to know are the essence of pedagogy at IBA, and similar business schools. For that matter, we provide a very conducive learning environment to our students by encouraging their discussions on both local and foreign case studies. Such healthy discussions make the learners curious to learn more, by probing the ideas discussed, for supporting their arguments in the discussions. Thus, they learn out of curiosity….." (5th Interviewee)

Likewise, commenting on the blended-mode of learning, another respondent added:

"……. The latest trend in our educational pedagogy is a blended method of instruction. In order to teach communication, interpersonal skills, interdependence, decision making, and conflict resolution, I usually approach my students by demonstrating a bad role-play or presentation of some theory, and then there is some discussion time which is followed by the demonstration of a good role-play or presentation….." (11th Interviewee)

However, keeping all these aspects, which were discussed, aside, all the respondents maintained that the project-based learning experience is the most viable pedagogical method to give market-specific exposure to the students, and so it ultimately adds to the employability potential of the graduates. In this regard, a prominent response of an interviewee was noted:

"…..Our course series is carefully planned. If we teach a theoretical course regarding Project Management in the first semester then in the second semester, there is a practical course regarding Industrial Projects…..We consciously set the worth and difficulty level of the projects. Project-based courses enable different skills' development, in our students in a broad manner, including time management, resilience, go-getter attitude, discipline, persistence, collaboration, communication, self-assessment, peer-assessment, task management, problem-solving, and other similar skills. All of these skills are acquired in different phases of a project, for example, when a student budgets, designs, schedules, develops, evaluates and tracks improvements in

the projects, allocates roles to the team members, reports on discrepancies, and develops documentation….." (3rd Interviewee)

Stating on how projects are managed, another respondent proclaimed:

"…..Skills are never taught, they are practiced. We do supervise, but we do not micro-manage our students in projects. They take the lead, they travel, write the letters or email to the concerned parties or CEOs for sponsorships, make the phone calls. In short, they experience the whole process which is a great learning experience….." (7th Interviewee)

Talking about how projects are executed at the top-tier business schools, a respondent elaborated:

"……For our final year students of BBA who are doing industrial projects, our Career Development Center prepares a particular specimen for the Companies. And then, the companies prepare a document of what they require from our students. For example, I am supervising three projects right now, one related to 1Link, and the other two are about KPMG International…..1Link wanted to recruit researchers for studying their employees' wellness during the times of Coronavirus pandemic. So, the recruiters selected three students for this task based on those students' interest in the area. When the project was given to the students, they were asked to consult two supervisors, one from the academic faculty, and the other one from the industry. Subsequently, both of these supervisors were required to sit together and decide the Terms of References (TORs), and then explain them to the students. The students are supposed to report on those mutually decided TORS by the supervisors. For this matter, a WhatsApp group was created where three parties, the student, the industry supervisor, and the faculty supervisor coordinate….." (12th Interviewee)

In addition, talking about how project-based study added to the employability potential of the graduate, a respondent stated:

"……We progressively set the difficulty levels of each project for our students, and quantify all aspects of it. For example, to make a student learn leadership skills, we assign him/her the project to interview someone at a CEO-level position. So, as a part of the project, the student practically interacts and observes a CEO to determine what leadership skills, such as vision, speech delivery, body language, etc., are required by the CEO……" (11th Interviewee)

Overall, this theme portrays that the most effective pedagogical methods for building employability skills in the students are case-based discussions, simulation-based learning, and project-based study.

5.   Conclusion and Discussion

The study acknowledges that the quality of academic strategies, practices and interventions results in better employability outcomes for the graduates, and improves the brand name of the University as well (Nadeem, 2021). Thus, it was designed with an idea of examining and exploring the academic interventions, strategies and practices deployed by the top-tier Business and Management institutes of Pakistan. This has been done to assist the other Business and Management institutes across Pakistan which don't fall in the category of top-tier University brands to inculcate the ways of achieving high employability outcomes for their graduates at their policy / strategic and practice levels.

Therefore, the study involved a detailed review of the top-tier Business and Management institutions (e.g., with regard to their strategies and best practices which they deployed to enable their graduates find employment opportunities during and immediately following their educational experiences), and employability ecosystems. Accordingly, a qualitative inquiry involving semi-structured interviews with the curriculum experts and developers, and course coordinators, instructors, and trainers was conducted for this matter. Subsequently, in the process of exploring and examining the efficacy of strategies and best practices of the top-tier University brands regarding the provision of employability skills to their graduates (e.g., through their use of various forums), four themes have emerged out in the study: Theme 1-Liaising with the industry employers and experts, Theme 2-Building enterprise skills through the development of incubation centers, Theme 3-Developing support services, and Theme 4- Incorporating

effective pedagogical methods & activities in the curriculum. These themes may assist the low-tier University brands to improve, in terms of the provision of the employability skills to their graduates.

The first theme portrays a multilevel approach to engagement with employers. This coincides with Boahin's (2018) assertion that Higher Education Institutions across developing countries need to expand their vision beyond teaching and research, and must be focused on reaching out to employers for collaborations to develop the employability competencies of their students. The findings of this theme highlight the good strategies and practices for building employers' engagement at the institutions through their facilitative and partnering roles. For example, the exploration of industry linkages practices revealed that the industry experts are invited to these top-tier institutes as a visiting faculty for teaching courses, and for general visits, industry presentation nights, speaking sessions as guest speakers and alumni talks. Moreover, the alumni were observed as the biggest source for finding internships and job placements for the graduates of their institutes. It was also observed that the most profound alumni linkages were gathered through the 'Executive Education' programs. In addition, the rapport with the industry experts (other than alumni) was also established since many companies happened to be the consultancy clients of these Business and Management institutes.

The results from the second theme established the strong role of incubation centers in shaping enterprise skills, entrepreneurship skills, and several other employability skills. For example, they highlight the functioning of the incubation centers with regard to providing the facilities, such as the think-tanks for refinement of the ideas, resources for execution of the ideas, proper marketing channels for launching the ventures, and Legal teams for registration of businesses. The third theme portrays active role of career services provided through the platform of Career Development Centers (CDC). The services of such centers were noted with regard to their role in internship placements along with their executions and evaluations, management of exchange programs, arrangement of seminars and workshops for employability skills, execution of recruitment drives and job fairs, and devising of extra-curricular activities. In summary, the findings of this theme revealed a strong role of the CDC in professional development of the graduates, and paving career pathways for them. Other than this, the support services of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs), and Student Counseling Centers were also noted as the key complementing factors for sustaining the employability potential of the graduates at the institutes.

The fourth theme portrays how top-tier Business and Management institutes imbed employability skills in their curriculum design by improvising their teaching methods. Under this theme, it was observed that the essence of the pedagogy at these institutes is to generate curiosity and eagerness to learn in their students. For this purpose, they utilized case-based teaching for inculcating the skills, such as conversing well in English, business problem solving, decision-making, and judgmental, analytical and critical thinking skills. In addition, learning through computer-based simulation was notified as the most effective method for the hands-on experience with somewhat real-world's work environment. Furthermore, these institutes utilized real industry projects to polish the employability personas of their graduates in all aspects. However, limited involvement of the industry was observed with regard to industry-specific curriculum development. On the whole, the results of the study portray the employability ecosystem of the top-tier Business and Management institutes as a role model and implication (e.g., through highlighting their best strategies and practices of employability-specific educational interventions) for the low-tier University brands to improve the inconsistency between the skills their graduates possess and the skills which may earn them employability or ensure their smooth transition from the status of a graduate to an employee (Packianathan & Narayanan, 2014).

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