The employability skills of business graduates in Syria: Do policymakers and employers speak the same language?

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1. INTRODUCTION

For most countries, the dilemma of university graduates’ employability becomes a critical issue involving different social, economic, cultural, and national aspects (Asonitou, 2015; Pavlin and Svetlik, 2014; Garrouste and Rodrigues, 2014; Farcnik and Domadenik, 2012; Gokuladas, 2010). To satisfactorily reach a level of employability that is nationally accepted, local governments adopt national educational strategies directed either toward market needs, national needs or a mix of both types of needs. This conflict produces, subsequently, conflicting beliefs in other aspects of educational policy such as national admissions policies to universities, educational providers, curricula issues and university graduates’ employability skills.

The critical question is whether universities should adapt themselves to produce a type of human resource that responds to the market needs or skills and qualifications (Afonso et al., 2012; Andrews and Russell, 2012) or whether the business sector should adapt its structure to be able to absorb the current skills that universities produce (Tran, 2015; Bryson, 2015; Shaw and Fairhurst, 2008). Each side has a point of view, however, that may contradict the view of the other side.

In Syria in 2012, just before the political instability, the Government State Plan assured the need for reforming the higher education sector in the country. This reform, according to the plan, should produce human resources that are capable of competing regionally and globally. Within the same intention and in order to comply with societal and national needs, the plan encouraged reforms within the business and private sector in terms of management, human resources and increasing job opportunities. However, arguments from both sides of the process still claim that each side should adapt itself to the needs or outputs of the other side.
Reports that were produced by local agencies at that time, or by international aid programs such as the European Union (EU), the United National Development Programme (UNDP) and others, deal with this dispute in a subjective rather than an objective manner. Most reports put higher pressure on universities to adapt their structures to the market needs of skills by ignoring the role that could be played by business sector, where this sector could be more aware of current curricula at Syrian universities. This dispute became more important for investigation during the political instability in the country starting in mid-2012 when business investments started to decline dramatically but government investments in universities were either stable or expanding.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to bridge this gap by comparing the trend of the desired employability skills in the field of business from the perspective of both higher education policymakers and employers from the private sector, ending up with a tool of business graduate types that could help both sides make more informed plans.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Different studies have referred to the difficulties and challenges facing higher education systems with regard to preparing employable graduates (Natalia et al., 2015; Tarvid, 2015; Abou-Setta, 2014; Sung et al., 2013; Clarke, 2008; Holmes, 2008; Little, 2008; Wilton, 2008). In exploring the relationship between skills developed in undergraduate programmes and those subsequently used in employment, particularly in managerial careers, and drawing on data drawn from a questionnaire survey of 1999 graduates, Wilton (2008) raised concerns about the extent to which higher education is able to adequately prepare graduates for employment.

In another study exploring the challenges facing the higher education system in Egypt in preparing graduates for the social, political and economic ramifications they will face, Holmes (2008) argued that higher education should reinforce the view that the lack of quality
in the higher education system fails to prepare graduates for the workforce and impacts the social stability of Egypt. He suggested that the higher education admissions process should become more competitive, thereby limiting the number of enrolments and expanding the resources that should be devoted toward higher education with a particular emphasis on workforce development.

Adapting universities’ curricula to match labour market needs, according to this category of studies, is crucial in increasing the chances of employability for graduates. This requires more attention to the type of skills people in the business sector would like university graduates to have (Azevedo et al., 2012; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Poon, 2012; Warraich and Ameen, 2011; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2009; Roomi and Harrison, 2008).

In this vein, and by investigating the needs and preferences for training among growth-oriented women-owned small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the East of England, Roomi and Harrison (2008) found that the programmes most in demand concerned innovation and opportunity recognition, business evaluation and growth considerations, development of strategic customers and customer care, and customer relationship management, as well as selling, networking and negotiation skills. Further, Rae (2008) explored the implications of the changing economic context both for higher education institutes (HEIs) and for graduates starting their careers in the United Kingdom and suggested that graduates need a higher level of economic literacy to make informed career changes in the changing economic context.

The first category of studies leads to the first research question:

What types of skills would business sector leaders love to be acquired by university business graduates in Syria?
In contrast to the previous view, other studies have referred to how the business sector should adapt its job terms of reference to match with the current graduates’ skills. For example, Shaw and Fairhurst (2008) suggested that employers, particularly graduate development managers, need to re-examine their graduate development schemes to ensure they are not only meeting the needs and expectations of the organisation but also the individuals for whom they are designed.

Livingstone (2010) argued that as there is evidence that formal educational attainments increasingly exceed the educational job requirements of the employed labour force in many advanced market economies, employers increasingly are engaging their underemployed workers in continual learning to try to reshape their jobs. This showed, according to Livingstone, the incompatibility of narrow economic market objectives with wider social objectives of democratic education.

Cai (2013) provided a conceptual framework for understanding what employers think about the value of graduates with similar educational credentials in the workplace (their employability). He suggested that international higher education providers can improve their graduates’ employment by influencing employers’ beliefs. Tran (2015) suggested that not only universities but also employers and other related stakeholders should acknowledge the changes in society, should be aware of the cultural features at work, and should see their responsibility in the employability process. They all should make an effort to create a mutual understanding, to collaborate and to enhance the development of graduate employability.

The second category of studies leads us to the second research question: What types of skills would higher education policymakers love to be acquired by university business graduates in Syria?
The third trend of studies focuses on the need to enhance cooperation between the university and business sectors for mutual understanding of employability skills. The literature revealed lots of studies in this category (for example, Clevenger et al., 2015; De Los Ríos-Carmenado et al., 2015; Jackson, 2014b; McKinnon et al., 2014; Hernandez et al., 2014; Krishnan, 2014; Oliague-Caballero and Valles-Rosales, 2014; Jwaifell, 2013; Sung et al., 2013; Ayoubi and Massoud, 2012a; McDonnell and O’Neill, 2009; Drake et al., 2009; Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009; Smith, 2008; McIlveen and Pensier, 2008; Meredith and Burkle, 2008; Johnson and Helms, 2008; Rabayah and Sartawi, 2008; Woods, 2008; Little, 2008).

McDonnell and O’Neill (2009), for example, outlined the challenges facing industrial and educational institutions in educating and training instrument engineers and found that educators, accrediting bodies and companies must work in alignment to continue to develop talented instrument engineers. Companies must work carefully to support young instrument engineers entering the workplace. Furthermore, by investigating the services for supporting students and graduates to make a smoother transition into graduate employment at an Australian university, McIlveen and Pensiero (2008) noted the success of a graduate-induction initiative which engaged employers at small- and medium-sized businesses traditionally unfamiliar with or unable to enter the graduate recruitment market.

This highlights the value of university career services’ contributions to undergraduate preparation for the world of work, the importance of inter-departmental cooperation within the university environment and the value of university-industry collaboration toward the goal of improving graduates’ transitions into the workforce. In a case study about the strategies of building bridges between university and industry, Meredith and Burkle (2008) found that both parties feel that they benefit from building bridges between universities and industry. This result provides evidence for a positive view that linking university students and industry in joint projects would increase the potential for a fuller learning experience for the students.
Additionally, using a case that identifies the practical issues and implications of employer engagement through course design, delivery and employee commitment in a higher education course delivered in the financial services sector, Drake et al. (2009) emphasised the importance of understanding the business of the employer, bespoke delivery models, and employee commitment for increasing employer participation in higher skills in the workplace, particularly for employers not traditionally engaging with universities for course delivery at the undergraduate level. By exploring how the initiative of embedding enterprise education across all subject areas of the University of Birmingham in the UK, Smith (2008) found that enterprise education can be integrated into the curriculum without enterprise-related learning outcomes having to replace subject-specific outcomes. In this regard, different priorities were identified such as entrepreneurship, social enterprise, self-employment and consultancy, using enterprise-related knowledge and skills to help identify, apply for and manage research funds.

Moreover, based on an explanatory case study approach to explore students’ perspectives on studying in a simulated work environment in a large metropolitan university, Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) pointed to the value of real world experience to learner employability, where students were most motivated in the subject matter where they could engage in activity or situations which they were likely to encounter in the real world of business. More specifically, in a study on the impact of vocational education and training (VET) on transitions to work for young people ages 15 to 24 in Australia, Woods (2008) suggested that young people who participate in the VET experience better employment outcomes compared to young people who do not participate in post-school education and training. Woods (2008) also found that programs linked to the workplace provide the most rapid and successful transitions, and that school VET programs have a particularly positive effect on transitions into work for early school leavers.
In a study on the experience of incorporating local business study into business curricula, Johnson and Helms (2008) found that students preferred working on a local company case rather than a textbook case. Most felt the local company case helped them understand the theories and concepts of financial statement analysis from the course and prepared them for future case analysis. After completing the case, the student respondents also perceived a better understanding of the strategic issues facing the industry and of the use and interpretation of financial ratios.

Moreover, in an exploration of the results of practical training for 450 ICT students in Palestine prior to their entrance into the labour market, Rabayah and Sartawi (2008) found that the vast majority of surveyed trainees felt that they gained valuable knowledge and experience in their field of specialization, and believed that the training was critical to their successful job search. The students clearly agreed that the practical training they received via the training program was a necessary supplement to their theoretical technical education in university information and communication technology (ICT) programs.

Furthermore, based on data collected from the graduating cohort of 1999–2000 across 11 European countries, five years after graduation, Little (2008) investigated the development of graduates in Europe and found differences in the incidence and length of UK graduates’ initial training in employment compared to all graduates. These differences can be explained in part by the traditionally looser “fit” between higher education and employment in the UK. Five years after graduation, UK graduates enjoyed similar levels of work-related training as their European counterparts, although there were quite large differences between employment sectors. Mapping out the relationship between employability skills and mobility, Sung et al. (2013) investigated the changing nature of employability skills in Singapore, moving from the original life skills or basic skills concepts to the increasingly work-oriented interpretation. They found that employability skills in Singapore are increasingly job-context related, going
beyond just holding down a job, and that mobility is likely to be influenced by the extent to which employability skills are shared between industries. This has led to the modification of workforce development training at the higher education level in Singapore in order to meet the needs for greater employability skills effectiveness.

The third category of studies leads us to the third research question:

How can the types of skills that both higher education policymakers and business sector leaders would love to be acquired by university business graduates in Syria be better linked together?

### 3. SYRIAN HIGHER EDUCATION PRIORITIES FOR EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

In accordance with Article No. 29 of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, education is granted for all people. Education is free for all levels and is obligatory from primary level to preparatory and secondary levels. There are two ministries concerned with education in Syria. The Ministry of Education governs the educational process up to the secondary level, and the Ministry of Higher Education governs tertiary education and lifelong learning.

Before the political instability, collaboration between business organizations and higher education institutions was limited, although some local chambers of commerce and industries in some cities have been approached on some occasions to modify the learning outcomes according to labour market needs. Graduate students can hardly find relevant jobs based on their basic higher education qualifications. The creation of new public and private universities before 2012 helped to recover some of employability problems.

During the current situation, such problems were, however, augmented because of lower economic growth rates and the migration of many businesses outside Syria. But there still is a gap in the labour market which is growing over the time of the crisis and especially for highly qualified employees and graduates. New higher education programmes and specializations
were introduced in reply to the consequences of the Syrian war. In particular, the names of
intermediate institutes were switched to be technical institutions with more practical subjects
which should provide more qualified graduates for the local labour market in the future.

Responding to the priorities identified in the state plan and to the needs for upgrading the
employability skills for graduates in Syria, the Ministry of Higher Education is striving to set
priorities, devise executive plans to implement them and continue the process of
modernization of the sector. The ministry is following the development of existing curricula
and implementing dynamic flexible rules for their continuous revision in response to social
and market needs. Nevertheless, the Council of Higher Education in Syria is conscious that
there is a need for major reform and diversification of the higher education programmes in
Syria to meet future development needs and has asked the various universities in the country
to reform and modernize their programmes. It has also eased regulations governing curricula
development and made them more decentralized and flexible.

With relevance to the programmes and university curricula that should correspond to or
match the needs of the labour market, the state plan refers to different types of skills that
should be acquired after a student passes a programme. What can be indicated from these
skills is that they are directed toward building individual capabilities as much as they
contribute to social skills. These skills as they are translated from the plan are:

- Cognitive and creative skills, such as problem-solving techniques and developing and
evaluating work plans and projects, developing the ability to express oneself, linking
creativity to work and team working techniques.

- Technical skills relating to work such as career choices and how to develop the
entrepreneur’s character, the way to improve a private business and to expand
investments, to be aware of local and export markets and to be able to use information
and data.
• Personal and creative skills such as negotiation skills, problem-solving skills, public relation skills and general management skills.

• Civic and citizenship skills such as social responsibility about working in both the private and the public sector; knowing about one’s rights, duties and responsibilities; diagnosing and analysing social and local economic problems and citizenship rights; and learning about responsibilities toward the community and society.

• Functional skills such as the ability to handle legal procedures of establishing and releasing businesses and private investments and knowledge about local and international investment rules.

These skills describe the ultimate state of the art for skills that business graduates should acquire. However, higher education policymakers and their counterparts in the business sector may have other views. This study aims at comparing the two points of view: the policymaker and the business sector.

4. THE STUDY APPROACH

Based on the study aims and questions raised earlier, the authors employed the main source of qualitative data through interviews. Interview data are one of the important sources of data (Heu et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2015; Silverman, 1999). Silverman (1999) argued that words are important simply as a jumping-off point for the real analysis; he suggested that where texts are analysed, they usually are presented as ‘official’ or ‘common sense’ versions of social phenomena. In relation to the aims of this study, the authors depended on the written priorities of the higher education sector in Syria and the written sector priorities as they appear in the official state plan. This stage of the documentary data was useful to the authors as it helped in drawing up the initial understanding of the research questions. This stage also provided wider insight to the research, which has been added to its final stages.
Once the authors finished this stage, and in line with previous studies (e.g., Ayoubi and Massoud, 2012b), the interview questions were amended accordingly and put in a semi-structured formulation. The authors divided the interviewees into two groups: higher education policymakers in business fields and directors of large private corporations in two main cities in Syria: Hums and Hama. Although each group had its own specific interview questions, most questions were the same. Interviews were conducted face to face in the interviewees’ places of work. Five very senior directors from the higher education sector (one from the Ministry of Higher Education and four from two universities, private and public) were interviewed. The selection of both public and private universities was based on the similarities of leadership styles of these universities as argued in a previous study by Khalifa and Ayoubi (2015). Seven very senior directors from the business private sector were interviewed.

To understand the content of the interviews, the authors made a transcription of the twelve interviews. In general, a coding strategy for each interview was individually adopted. This was based on the main contradictory issue of the graduate supply and the demand of labour forces. To clarify the outcomes of the study, the authors investigated the similarities and differences amongst the twelve interviews.

5. THE RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Interviews with senior managers in the private sector

In contrast to the interviews with senior higher education policymakers, the authors conducted seven interviews with senior managers in the private sector. Most of the interviews were conducted with very senior people in the business sector in two metropolitan cities, Hums and Hama. In response to study question number 1, most of these managers referred to the following skills as those in which they believe and those that business graduate students should acquire:
• leadership skills within their own directorates;
• computer, internet and technology skills;
• previous experience in the sector;
• educational qualifications;
• language capacities; and
• good professional skills.

Age was also considered important. With regard to the skills referred to by people from the industry, the most critical skills that interviewees from the business sector agreed upon were the technical and soft skills. A senior manager from the business sector pointed out:

[...] our universities in Syria produce nothing. Most graduates from these universities need lots of training before joining the labour market [...]. Frankly speaking, I would not be happy to employ any business graduate if he does not have the computer skills, the language skills, and enough experience needed for the job. Managers that we would appoint may not have a business degree, but they may have the experience that qualifies them to be managers. Higher education certificates are not always important [...].

These results are consistent with those of previous studies (Collet et al., 2015; Jackson, 2014a, 2014b; Durrani and Tariq, 2012; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2009). In a study of the competencies that Spanish firms demand from university graduates and the curricula that universities follow to educate their students, Marzo-Navarro et al. (2009) showed that universities must improve specific competences in the education of their students. This improvement would mean a better fit between university curricula and business demands. In a survey of 1008 business undergraduates, Jackson (2014b) suggested that a range of factors influence competence in employability skills. These include geographical origin, sex, work
experience, engagement with the skills agenda, stage of degree studies, scope of relationships and activities beyond education and work, and the quality of skills development in the learning programme.

Moreover, Durrani and Tariq (2012) revealed the importance that employers attach to graduates’ numeracy skills and the extent to which employers use numeracy tests in graduate recruitment. Employers highlight the potential for poor numeracy skills to limit any graduate’s acquisition of employment, irrespective of their degree subject; especially because numeracy tests are used predominantly in recruitment to the types of jobs commensurate with graduates’ career aspirations and within sectors that attract graduates from across the diversity of academic disciplines, including the arts and humanities.

In a survey in the innovation and commercialisation industry regarding perceptions of skills in graduates and skills in demand, Collet et al. (2015) identified ten broad constructs that represent cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Knowledge, leadership and inter-professional collaboration feature as prominent skills. Employers’ perceptions of graduate skills specifically were centred on organisational fit and organisational success.

**Interviews with higher education policymakers**

The authors conducted five interviews with higher education policymakers in business studies. The interviews ranged from very senior people at the Ministry of Higher Education to senior managers in business faculties at two universities. In response to the study question number 2, most higher education managers referred to the following skills in which they believed and those that business graduates should acquire:

- team work;
- entrepreneurial skills;
- innovative and critical thinking;
• ability to practice planning;
• motivation;
• communication;
• analytical thinking;
• social thinking;
• imaginative thinking;
• objectivity; and
• soft skills.

The most critical views that most interviewees from the higher education sector agreed upon were the social skills as well as graduates’ way of thinking, described as the thinking style that connects them to the global environment. For example, a senior higher education policymaker commented:

[...] our graduates in general, and business graduates in particular, are lack of the innovative way of thinking [...] however, I would not blame them, as the curricula plays a role on this, the academic staff plays another role, and the bureaucracy also plays the most important role. If we want to develop a new generation who would be able to lead the future of Syria, we should take these issues into consideration [...] we need more graduates, who can think critically, who have the imaginative style of thinking [...] this is because they need to interact with different people in society, in the surrounding environment [...].

Consistent with these results, Sail and Alavi (2010) ascertained that social skills and social values can and must be taught to apprentices to enhance their employability skills as well as to remove any barriers for upward mobility in students’ careers. According to Sail and Alavi (2010), universities can integrate social skills and social values in their technical curriculum
to provide apprentices with the foundation of human and social competence required to be an
effective workforce to face future challenges and global competition. Moreau and Leathwood
(2006) also suggested that in contrast to assumptions of a level playing field in which
graduates’ skills and personal qualities are the key to their success in the labour market,
social class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability and university attended all have an impact on
the opportunities available and they also can be required from business employers. The
authors argued that the discourse of employability, with its emphasis on individual
responsibility and neglect of social inequalities, has potentially damaging consequences for
graduates.

6. THE MATRIX OF BUSINESS GRADUATE TYPE

Based on the previous results and in response to the third research question, the study
indicates that while higher education policymakers believe that business graduates should
have skills that are mostly socially and ethically oriented, managers from the private and
business sector believe in acquiring individual and technical skills that may benefit the
business. The previous scenario points to the traditional dispute between public thinking and
private thinking, which is reflected clearly in the managers’ opinions regarding the skills of
business graduates. However, the state plan which was identified earlier may draw up a
compromise scenario that is neither public nor private. To compare the previous two sources
of data, the authors developed the matrix of Business Graduate Type (see Figure 1).

The model that is portrayed in Figure 1 is a two-dimensional model that aligns the two ways
of thinking illustrated in interviews with higher education policymakers and the private and
business sector regarding the skills of business graduates. The horizontal axis (the first
dimension of the model) represents the individual-oriented skills, mostly expressed by the
private and business sector. The acquisition of these skills could range from high to low. The
vertical axis of the model (the second dimension of the model) represents the social-oriented
skills, mostly expressed by higher education policymakers. The acquisition of these skills also could range from high to low. Drawing on the model, four styles of graduates are recognized.

**Figure 1. Matrix of Business Graduate Types.**

**Leader style**

This style of how business graduates should be in the future is the leader style. In this style, business graduates should have a high level of individual and technical skills as well as high social and communication skills. This style represents the best alignment between the two perspectives of higher education and the business sector regarding business graduates’ skills which is targeted by the state plan. The graduates acquire individual and private skills and at the same time behave socially and think toward the plural.

**Collective-manager style**

This style of how business graduates should be in the future is the collective-manager style. The business graduate in this style should behave socially and think more toward the plural.
Managers who acquire the skills of pluralistic and analytical thinking would fit more in this group; however, this does not mean that those managers are ignoring the other types of skills. Most higher education policymakers in the study said these skills should be acquired by business graduates.

**Technical-manager style**

This style of how business graduates should be in the future is the technical-manager style. In this style of management, business graduates should have good experience and practical appreciation, and more individual and technical skills than social and analytical skills. In this study, most managers from the private sector believe in this type of manager.

**Trainee-manager style**

This style of business graduate has neither individual and technical skills nor social and analytical skills. This type of graduate needs training in both sets of skills. None of the interviewees favour this type of manager but new graduate students may fit better in this quadrant as they need training for both types of skills.

**Dynamics of the model** - The matrix can serve as a managerial tool that helps top management when selecting candidates for managerial jobs. This matrix can also be a tool for benchmarking for current employees within the same institution or between institutions. Based on its corporate strategy, the Human Resource Departments at the business sector can develop further tools that help the executives identifying the skills that respond to each one of the four styles. A more workable comprehensive sub models can be developed at Human Resource Departments, where this could imply training programmes that increase mobility within the four styles in order to move forward towards the most preferable type that responds to the strategic aims of the business.
7. CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study explores the two perspectives of higher education and the business sector with regard to business administration graduate requirements. The study ends up with the development of a qualitative comparative scenario that aligns the two perspectives by identifying four styles of graduates: the leader style, the collective-manager style, the technical-manager style and the trainee-manager style.

Shedding light on the views of higher education policymakers, the social and pluralistic skills as well as the thinking skills stem as the main requirements for business administration graduates. As most of the relevant studies raised the voices of the business sector in the subject matter, our results introduce new insights to the literature by raising the voices of the higher education sector. The study, however, explores the views of the business sector in Syria, which reflect the focus on individual and technical skills. These results are consistent with previous research that identified the individual and professional skills as key employability skills required by employers (Azevedo et al., 2012; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Poon, 2012; Dickerson and Green, 2004).

Although a number of previous studies show that employers in other countries such as Australia (Jackson and Chapman, 2012), Spain (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2009), and the United Kingdom (Poon, 2012) have moderated views that combine the individual and social skills, the results show that employers in Syria rather ignore social and pluralistic skills. A plausible explanation for this lies in the fact that most Syrian businessmen and managers perceive corporate social responsibility as a matter of ethics but do not see ways to benefit from its practices, admitting that some of corporate social responsibility practices are enforced by law (Massoud and Ayoubi, 2012).

Accordingly, a collaborative role should be played by all stakeholders in the higher education sector in Syria to address the graduates’ employability problem. Importantly, on the first
hand, university higher education policymakers should respond to the skills that are required by managers in the business sector. As seen earlier in the paper, curricula development and improving and updating teaching and learning methods would be an important response. These methods should embrace relevance and currency in relation to business needs. On the other hand, managers of the business sector should be more aware of university academic studies and the benefits arising out of engaging in these higher level studies; they should look at universities as the holistic source of future managers of the business in Syria.

Enhancing trust of university business graduates would be very important for managers in the business and private sector. Jackson (2016) explored skills transfer in graduates as they transition from university to the workplace. He highlighted the need for a more process-oriented, rather than outcomes-focused, approach to the acquisition and transfer of skills in graduates and the shared responsibility of transfer among stakeholder groups. Jackson suggested a generic model of skills transfer and intervention strategies for educators and employers.

The more cooperative work and the greater belief in university-industry partnerships will create bridges between the two sectors. In this regard, the study implicitly refers also to the important role that would be played by current career and job centres at Syrian universities in organising placement programmes to bridge this gap. Gallagher (2015) looked at the role of graduate placement programmes for seven graduates in bridging the gap between higher education and the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, showing that graduate placement programmes can help graduates in their transition to the SME workplace but the impact can vary according to the individual placement context. Jonasson (2014) argued that boundaries between school and work practices do not exist. He suggested that more attention needs to be directed to the negotiations in which particular boundary connections between
school and work practices are developed, where this may have important consequences for
the preparing of students for apprenticeship.

Nonetheless, the results of the study are based on limited qualitative data mainly taken from
documents and a few interviews, twelve. More research is urgently needed to analyse the
phenomenon from the perspective of other stakeholders in the sector and the emerging future
plans to reconstruct the country after the political deterioration.

The current study was also based on a description of the phenomenon as seen by
interviewees, thus more action research is needed in the future. The study was limited by data
collected before the current political instability in Syria in 2012. The data were collected only
from interviews with policymakers and employers. Students are important stakeholders in
such types of study (Tomlinson, 2007). Furthermore, the matrix of business graduate types
resulting from this study, which revealed four types of business graduates after graduation,
could be investigated further. The current study paved the way toward investigating the type
of students during their study and how such types fit with the overall Business Graduate Type
matrix. This can be linked to an earlier study by Ayoubi and Ustwani (2014) which
investigated the relationship between students’ Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI),
preferences and academic performance.

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