LIFELONG LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY: MOVING FROM FACE-TO-FACE LESSONS TO DIGITAL CONTENT IN THE MIDST OF LOCKDOWN

P. Otermans, D. Aditya

Otermans Institute (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract

Today over 750 million learners globally are unable to learn skills that can enhance their employability. For the majority, there is almost a need to cut off the development of these skills to pursue achieving higher grades in their core subjects, especially in regions in South Asia and in the MENA region. This causes a complete mismatch between the requirements in the job market and the qualification achieved by the students, leading to high unemployment rates. Inserting key employability and transferable skills in the development of learners is crucial. Our curriculum that we developed over 18 months will be solving this for 750 million learners one region at a time. This paper will focus on the rapid shift to digital learning that was needed when the first lockdown hit the world in March 2020, just at the time when we were about to launch our curriculum with several institutions and a state Government in India. We transferred our curriculum to digital sessions and implemented this in nine countries globally. The majority of our learners are underserved, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, are first-time learners, and English is not their native language. Student feedback (N = 199) showed an overall satisfaction of 93.8%. In addition, 93.4% of learners agreed that they understand and learned more about the topics provided each week. Furthermore, comments from trainers showed positive feedback and engagement with the learners, and saw continuous improvement despite some language barriers. Most recently, we also received UKRI funding to take our solution to the African continent. Overall, this shows the need for this type of training. This paper will discuss the curriculum development, its implementation, its usability across countries, and student engagement, performance and feedback.

Keywords: Employability, online learning, student feedback, international curriculum, innovative teaching and learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

The world requires people to develop strong soft skills and transferable skills as workplaces are transformed and modernised by technology and by digital transformations. As a result, talents like innovation and creativity are increasingly prized by employers, but early development of these and other "soft skills" – such as critical thinking and decision making – also improves student performance [1]. These people skills and transferable skills are more critical than ever as organisations struggle to find meaningful ways to remain competitive and be productive. Educators and employers promote the "Four Cs" vital for success in the 21st century which include critical thinking, communication, creativity and collaboration. However, learners globally are unable to learn these types of skills that will enhance their employability and career prospects. This is mainly because in many regions in South Asia and in the MENA region, there is a trend to cut off the development of these transferable skills and instead actively focus on learning core subjects and achieving high grades in those. This archaic way of learning and focus on traditional subject areas causes a mismatch between the requirements in the job market and the qualification the students achieve. This leads to high unemployment rates, rapid switching between jobs, and jobs dissatisfaction [2]. Reducing this global skills and employability gap has been a challenge for social innovation and society for decades.

Whilst significant progress has been made, over millions of potential learners still lack access to basic transferable and employability skills training which leads to unemployment or dissatisfaction in the job market [3]. This high graduate unemployment is the result of the focus of the education systems in these developing countries like India, which is still primarily focused on hard skills and, more recently, vocational training. Additionally, due to these teaching and learning systems, graduates entering their respective job markets lack transferable skills required to get jobs in the current Industrial Revolution 4.0. These have been evidenced in academia and also in industry surveys by India Today which have shown that over 60% employers believe that lack of transferable skills was the primary challenge they faced in employing people [3]. Recently 90% of engineering graduates, in a national survey conducted by BridgeLabz, a prominent employability research organisation, in India, felt that they needed soft skills; a part of transferable skills, to get employment but were not trained in them [4]. Currently, the COVID-

19 pandemic has also changed the job market and making transferable skills and soft skills even more important to get employed. Communication skills are key whilst working remotely and digitally, and we believe creativity and critical thinking skills are needed to adapt to this new work style.

One billion young people will join the workforce in underdeveloped and developing countries by 2030 [5]. Today, 750 million adults—two thirds of whom are women—remained illiterate in 2016. Focusing in on South Asia, it can be seen that this area alone is home to nearly half (49%) of the global population who are illiterate [6]. In addition, 520 million people are affected by violence, war or disaster and unable to skill themselves with 71 million displaced [7]. When specifically looking at South Asia and the MENA region, it is known that 1 million learners turn 18 years old every month in India without employability and formal transferable skills training [8] and 400 million young people in the MENA region will most likely not have transferable skills training in the next two decades due to their current nations' education systems [9].

Inserting key employability and transferable skills in the development of learners is crucial for their future career prospects and professional development. Enhancing employability can be defined as a set of skills and attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations [10]. Furthermore, with the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the current landscape of jobs as well as skills required for these jobs is continuously changing [11]. The vision of Otermans Institute is to upskill a generation using transferable skills and employability skills. This paper will focus on the rapid shift to digital learning that was needed when the first lockdown hit the world in March 2020, just at the time when we were about to launch our curriculum with several institutions and a state Government in India. We transferred our curriculum to digital sessions and implemented this in nine countries globally. Furthermore, this paper will discuss the curriculum development, its implementation and its usability across countries.

Our curriculum that we developed over 18 months is solving this skills gap for 750 million learners one region at a time. The curriculum focuses on the development of transferable and employability skills using interactive learning and was designed for weekly two hours face-to-face training sessions. The majority of our learners are underserved, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, are first-time learners, and English is not their native language. At the time when we were about to launch our curriculum, after piloting with several schools in rural India, with several institutions and a State Government in India, the COVID-19 pandemic meant schools were shut down and the world went into the first lockdown in March 2020. This meant a rapid shift to digital learning was required and our curriculum was transferred to digital sessions. However, as learning now became remote and digital, it meant we could expand more rapidly. Our new, digital curriculum was implemented in nine countries globally. Interacting for two hours, the duration of face-to-face lessons, digitally via Zoom would lead to reduced attention, fatigue, and reduced motivation; hence the lessons were shortened to one hour. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on four countries. The next section will discuss its implementation focusing on student engagement, performance and feedback.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

A total of 199 individuals participated in the survey. The mean age of learners was 19.94 years (*SD* = 4.96 years) and the range was 13-40 years. Learners were associated with ten different institutions in Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, and Iraq. For all learners, English was not their first language.

2.2 Materials

The survey consists of three sections: 1) Experience with the lesson; 2) Experience with the trainers and Otermans Institute; and 3) Demographic questions.

Experience with the lesson. Learners were asked to complete four questions. First, they rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = definitely disagree, 5 = definitely agree) whether they understood and learned more about the topic of that day. Secondly, they rated their understanding of that day's lesson using a 5-star rating. Thirdly, they commented on how much they understood from the lesson using an open-text comment. Finally, they described what they found confusing about the lesson using an open-text comment.

Experience with the trainers and satisfaction with Otermans Institute. Learners were asked to complete another set of four questions. First, they rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = definitely disagree, 5 = definitely agree) the explanations of trainers and secondly using the same scale they rated their overall

satisfaction with the training received from Otermans Institute. Thirdly, they described suggestions for improvements with the lessons (open-text). Finally, they were asked to describe the most positive, helpful or enjoyable aspects from the training (open-text).

Demographics. In the final section, learners were asked to complete four open questions about the topic of the lesson, the name of their institutions, their age and their name (in order to record attendance).

2.3 Procedure

Learners received weekly one-hour digital lessons on a variety of transferable skills and employability skills topics, and each week was dedicated to a single topic. The sessions were delivered by trainers mainly based in the UK. Learners from the same institution attended the lesson via Zoom and engaged with their lesson in smaller breakout rooms of 5-6 learners per room and one trainer. If permitted, the same trainer taught the same learners each week. For each lesson, the trainer has a PowerPoint containing all content for that topic. These PowerPoints are based on Otermans Institute's face-to-face curriculum and have each been adapted to a digital environment. Each lesson is delivered in an interactive teaching style, whereby learners are asked questions, discussions take place, group activities, and each lesson always end with a quiz (open questions, true/false questions) to test the understanding and retention of the content of that lesson. The topics included in this paper are 'Feedback', 'Organising and Problem Solving', 'Leadership', 'Effective Communication', 'Wellbeing', 'Presentations', and 'Critical Thinking'. At the end of the lesson, learners are asked to fill in a short survey via Microsoft Forms about their experience of that lesson. Participation was voluntary but learners were encouraged to complete the survey; no financial inducements were offered to participants.

3 RESULTS

Data was analysed using Microsoft Excel (quantitative aspects) and NVivo (qualitative aspects). Results are limited to those learners who completed the entire survey (*N* = 199).

3.1 Experience with the lesson

Results showed that 85.4% (*N* = 170) learners definitely agreed that they understood and learned more about the topic of the lesson and 8.0% (*N* = 16) (Fig. 1) slightly agreed with that statement. Furthermore, only 2.5% (*N* = 5) learners slightly/definitely disagreed that they understood and learned more about the topic of the lesson. This shows that the lessons are pitched at the right level, keeping in mind that English is not the learners' native language and this is the first time they are exposed to these topics on employability and transferable skills.

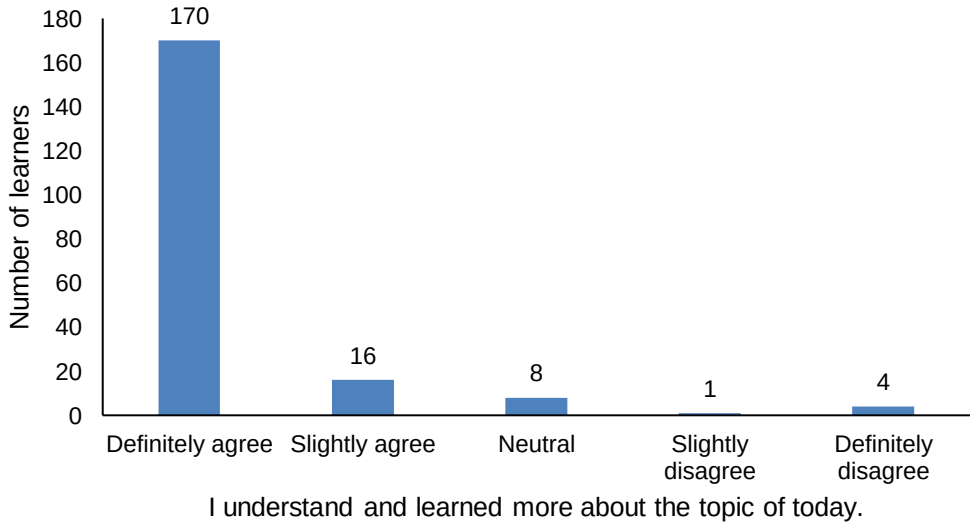

Figure 1. Learners responses to the question: "I understand and learned more about the topics." using a 5-point scale.

This is in line with responses to the second question where learners rated "How much did you understand from the lesson?" using a 5-star rating. 94.5% of learners (*N* = 188) gave a 4- or 5-star rating

(Table 1). These two results indicate that learners had a good understanding of what was being taught and they learned more about the topics.

Table 1. Breakdown of star-rating on the leaner's understanding of the lesson.

	Number of learners	Percentage of learners
One-star	1	0.5%
Two stars	2	1.0%
Three stars	8	4.0%
Four stars	35	17.6%
Five stars	153	76.9%
Total	*199*	*100%*

The open-ended questions in this section gathered learners' views and detailed opinions on their experience with the lesson. This includes two questions: Their views on their understanding of the lesson and anything they found confusing about the lesson. Results show that learners described their understanding of the lessons in a positive way; almost all learners said they 'understood everything' with some outlining the key things that made this session beneficial to them (i.e. 'learning a new topic', 'benefiting a lot', 'learning a lot'). What really stood out in their feedback was how valuable and needed the lessons appeared to them. In relation to any confusions in the lessons, the majority of learners noted that everything was explained and outlined very clearly with the use of different examples to support their understanding. Some learners acknowledged that there were 'a lot of new words' or 'a lot of new ideas' in such a short space of time to fully understand. However, most learners noted that it was very easy to understand and concepts were clarified by the trainers.

3.2 Experience with the trainers and satisfaction with Otermans Institute

Results showed that 84.9% (*N* = 169) of learners definitely agreed that the trainers are good at explaining things and 9.0% (*N* = 18) (Fig. 2) slightly agreed with that statement. Furthermore, only 2.5% (*N* = 5) of learners slightly/definitely disagreed that trainers are good at explaining things. This again shows that the lessons are pitched at the right level and that the trainers interact well with the students, despite language barriers, clarifying any concepts where needed.

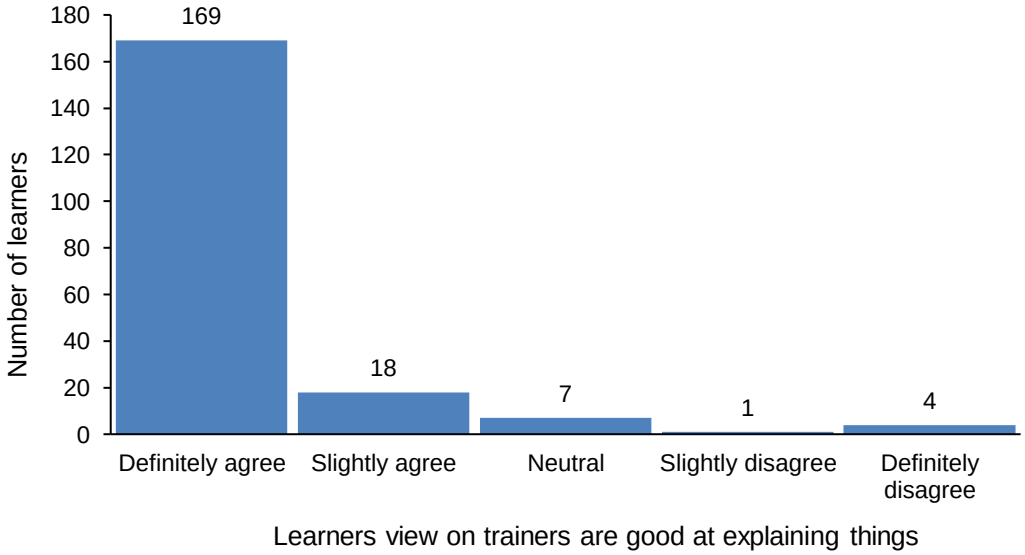

Figure 2. Learners responses to the question: "Trainers are good at explaining things." using a 5-point scale.

Overall, 96.5% (*N* = 192) of learners slightly agreed or definitely agreed that they enjoyed and are satisfied with the training received from Otermans Institute (Fig. 3).

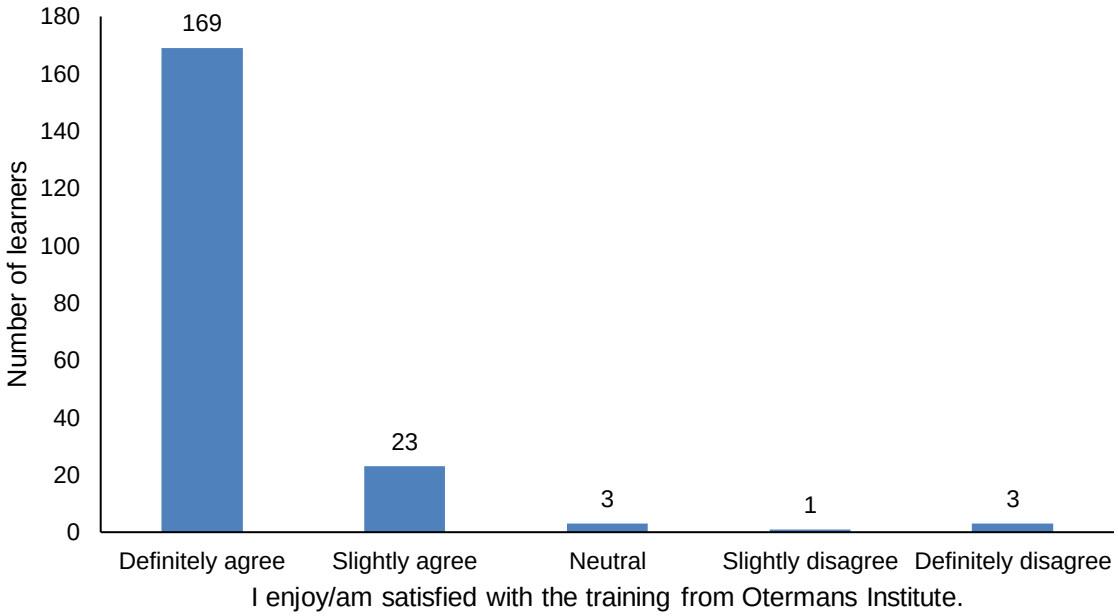

Figure 3. Learners overall satisfaction with the training from Otermans Institute in response to the statement: "Overall, I enjoy/am satisfied with the training from Otermans Institute." using a 5-point scale.

This was also shown by the responses of the learners about what they found to be the most positive, helpful or enjoyable aspects of the training from Otermans Institute (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Word cloud indicating the aspects that learners found enjoyable from the training with Otermans Institute.

Learners commented that the lesson went well highlighting the use of visual aids, the quiz at the end of each lesson, and the teaching itself as being positive aspects of their learning. The way of teaching (interacting, engaging, discussions, and activities) meant that everyone was getting involved and this was mentioned as an effective way of learning. In addition, learners described the positive way in which they interact with their trainers. They specifically enjoyed the 'communication' between trainers and learners, that this communication is open and producing a calm, interactive, friendly and motivational environment. This is further described by the lessons being 'perfect' and 'entertaining', and many learners acknowledged their trainers as being 'helpful' and 'supportive' in their attitudes towards learners and their way of teaching was often described as 'excellent'. Some learners also commented on the friendliness of the trainers noting that 'they give respect to everyone's view' and this was something that they saw as helpful and positive aspects of the lessons. Learners had a lot to say when it came to the enjoyable aspects of the lessons with learners loving the trainers and the way in which the interaction

allowed them to feel more confident. This interactive way of teaching is an integral part of our training to the trainers. Some learners noted that they were able to learn new terms and more information that helped them intellectually while also improving their English.

Finally, learners also suggested areas for improvement for future lessons. While the majority of learners had no suggestions for improvements as they were very satisfied, there were a range of different types of suggestions made by a few learners. These included more training sessions, longer training sessions, face-to-face sessions, inclusion of videos in the teaching material (although there are a few), and provide even more practical examples.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Bridging the gap between education and graduate employment is a challenge. Our curriculum aims to reduce this gap by providing transferable skills and employability skills training to the most disadvantaged and unserved populations globally with a current focus on the South Asian region and the MENA region. This paper outlined the successful, rapid transformation from a face-to-face curriculum to a digital environment. Learners were highly engaged during the digital lessons and feedback showed that overall satisfaction of learners was 93.8%, and 93.4% of learners said that they understood and learned more about the topics on transferable and employability skills training. Future research will explore the longitudinal effects of this curriculum across topics and institutions as well as the expansion of taking this curriculum to the African continent as this region also shows a need for this type of training [12].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Mr Hisham Sabir Khan who helped facilitate the relationship with all the organisations involved in this paper and whose learners are trained by our programme. We would also like to thank Mr Mazen Karam and Bethlehem Development Foundation (BDF) for their continuous support to expand our work in Palestine.

REFERENCES

[1] D.W. Schanzenbach, R. Nunn, L. Bauer, M. Mumford, A. Breitwieser, “Seven Facts on Noncognitive Skills from Education to the Labor Market”, *The Hamilton Project* (US Think Thank), 2018.

[2] Dewan & Sarkar, “From Education to Employability: Preparing South Asian Youth for the World of Work, *Just Jobs and Unicef*, 2017.

[3] B. Manour & J. Dean, “Employability Skills as Perceived by Employers and University Faculty in the Fields of Human Resource Development (HRD) for Entry Level Graduate Jobs”, *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies,* vol. 4, pp39-39, 2016. doi: 10.4236/jhrss.2016.41005

[4] BridgeLabz, 2020, https://www.bridgelabz.com/.

[5] O. Cann, “The Reskilling Revolution: Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Education for a Billion People by 2030”, *World Economic Forum*, 2020, https://www.weforum.org/press/2020/01/the-reskilling-revolution-better-skills-better-jobs-better-education-for-a-billion-people-by-2030/.

[6] United Nations, “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, *United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs,* 2019, https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-04/.

[7] J. Keaten, “UN: Record 71 million people displaced by war and violence”, *United Nations*, 2019, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2019/0619/UN-Record-71-million-people-displaced-by-war-and-violence.

[8] J. O’Connor, “Every month for the next several years, 1 million Indians will turn 18”, *The Guardian*, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/24/somini-sengupta-the-end-of-karma-interview.

[9] World Green Building Council, “World Green Building Council Congress”, 2019, https://www.worldgbc.org/calendar/mena-green-building-congress-2019.

[10] Yorke, “Employability in Psychology: A Guide for Department”, *Higher Education Academy,* 2006.

[11] Schwab, “The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond”, *World Economic Forum,* 2016, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/.

[12] ICEF, “Africa’s pressing need for targeted skills training”, *ICEF Monitor,* 2019, https://monitor.icef.com/2019/07/africas-pressing-need-for-targeted-skills-training/.