UNIVERSITY GRADUATES' ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITIES: IMPRESSIONS FROM THE LABOR SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

English knowledge, skills and abilities are the core of the four major macro skills which are requirements for graduates to have a promising career. This study investigated on the reading, writing and speaking skills of the fresh Bahraini graduates and identified its implications to the impressions of the labor force. Statistical tools like the mean and the T-test were used and thereby revealed that there are gaps between the impression and the results of the assessments. The participants dominated by female young executives have high expectations from the fresh graduates; however, the assessments' results revealed a moderately satisfaction among the participants and there are interventions needed for better performance of the fresh graduates that exhibit the reading, writing and speaking skills of the fresh graduates in English.

Keywords: English Language Abilities, Actual reading, writing and speaking skills, Impressions.

INTRODUCTION

The fact that language skills boost employment opportunities is an historic adage. In today's world of globalization of businesses and the huge diversity of workforce in most countries, necessitates the need for reading, writing and speaking good English, especially when it comes to employability. Though English language ability is a must in the private sector, governmental agencies are fast adopting the language as inter-governmental dealings, treaties, agreements and even day-to-day communication is now done in English.

With unemployment hovering around 27% in the Middle East, governments are urging youngsters to do their best to gain this important skill of learning English for communication. A comprehensive research conducted, as recent as 2016 by Bahrain Polytechnic in association with an external consultant to study among others, the importance of English language for employability [1]. The research studied the responses of students as well as two focus groups of employers comprising Engineering, Information and Communication Technology, Web Media, Visual Design, Logistics and Business and the findings strongly point to the need for English Language as key for employment. This research however, focuses on employers of the private sector alone and the emphasis is on retail, insurance, airline and banking sectors only, which accounts for the largest chunk of our business graduates.

It goes without saying that universities in the Kingdom of Bahrain play a very cardinal role in developing English language skills of its graduates. With this as a backdrop, the researcher aims to find out as to how the labor market of Bahrain perceives the abilities and skills of graduates in English language and its importance at a place of work.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored based from the job characteristic theory proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1976)] stated that work should be designed to have five core job characteristics, which engender three critical psychological states in individuals—experiencing meaning, feeling responsible for outcomes, and understanding the results of their efforts. In turn, these psychological states were proposed to enhance employees' intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, quality of work and performance, while reducing turnover [2]. Relatively, the following conceptual paradigm illustrates the study's framework.



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Statement of the Problem

The researcher aims to quantify the perception of employers on how they rate Bahraini graduates on their English language capabilities of reading, writing, speaking and analyzing business English. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

- 1. What is the profile of the respondents in terms of the following:
 - 1.1 age
 - 1.2 gender
 - 1.3 position
- 2. What is the respondents' level of impression to the Bahraini graduates with regards to the following:
 - 2.1 direct supervision of fresh graduates
 - 2.2 desired English Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
 - 2.3 actual English knowledge, skills, and abilities
- 3. Is there a relationship between the assessments of the desired and the actual English competences according to the following:
 - 3.1 assessments between the desired and actual English reading skills of fresh graduates
 - 3.2 assessments between the desired and actual English writing skills of fresh graduates
 - 3.3 assessments between the desired and actual English speaking skills of fresh graduates
 - 3.4 assessments between the desired and actual skills of fresh graduates in understanding English documents
 - 3.5 assessments between the desired and actual skills of fresh graduates in analyzing English information

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been operationally defined for clearer understanding of the study.

Direct supervision. It generally means to be physically present during the monitoring period where the fresh graduate receives detailed instructions to specified procedures to be followed. English Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities. It is the practical ability of understanding of a subject learned and applied to the workplace.

Actual English reading skills. It refers to the ability to read with a purpose and goal for understanding the technical documents in the workplace.

Actual English writing skills. It refers to the ability and knowledge to write business correspondence and technical reports using the correct format and observing the principles that govern composition writing.

Actual English speaking. It is the ability to speak with confidence and appropriateness in the workplace.

Skills in understanding English documents. It refers to the ability to use a source to find specific information

Skills in analyzing English information. It refers to the ability to read between the surface of the document.

Significance of the Study

This study is important for English language faculty and universities in that both parties could have firsthand information on how Bahraini graduates are perceived by potential employers and how critical is English language ability in potential job offers. This study is also useful for Bahraini graduates as this will give them a holistic view of how important English language is when it comes to improving their chances for employment.

Scope and Limitation

The study intends to quantify the perception of potential employers in the private sector of Bahrain. The researcher aims to provide a bird's- eye view into the said research. The study is limited to a sample of potential employers spread across the retail, insurance, banking and airline industries in the private sector. Further research needs to be done to incorporate the other sectors of the private sector and the public sector as well, so as to have a well-rounded perspective of employers across a larger sample size.

LITERATURE REVIEW

On account of globalization and the internationalization of businesses around the world, skilled employees (of other nationalities) are accused of taking up jobs of locals. For a long time, this idea has been discussed and mooted over various audiences in various countries. The knowledge of English Language as a key skill has been talked about for eons in the Middle East.

Burke (2017) stated that experience can be valuable in managerial roles; it doesn't necessarily make that person a good leader. Hudson supported Burke and recommended that young managers should put time aside to develop their management skill once they are in the workplace [3].

Gu and Bourne (2007) emphasized in their article "Ten Simple Rules for Graduate Students" that hard work should be balanced with other activities to enjoy and to take a break. These activities can often become important one's future. career. Collaborations sometimes start not

because of a shared scientific interest, but because you share the same hobby or other interest [4].

In a study commissioned by the Australian government, Arkoudis et. al (2009) stressed that ELP is a key factor influencing their employment outcomes. Potentially, fresh graduates respond to the employers' expectation through policies and practices that support integrated approaches for enhancing ELP and workplace [5].

Thomas et. al. (2016) disclosed that generic employability skills channeled through English as a second or additional language are highly valued by Bahrain's employers. In particular, candidates need to market themselves as confident, knowledgeable individuals during the recruitment process and after recruitment, continuing to operate successfully in the sociolinguistic culture of their company [6].

Rahman (2007) mentioned in his thesis that students should be made to read and find out the meaning of the text. [5]. Hellekhjaer supported this statement and stated that poor language proficiency was a problem for many. The role of EFL instruction in preparing for higher education is more clearly recognized [7].

Linville (2015) lamented when she said that college students usually do not put so much importance on improving their writing skills. The National Commission on writing which employed 3.7 million people conducted a survey in the US and found that writing vouch graduates in obtaining a salaried job [8].

A GMAT blogger reiterated that the key to any venture is communication. Speaking proficiency of the employees can make a difference in business sectors. All financial tools are useless if one cannot communicate points clearly. Accordingly, communication skills are a part of package that exhibit employees' potentials [9].

Francis (2006) stated in "Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learner" that the development of academic language is fundamental to academic success in all domains. Students with word-reading difficulties need targeted and explicit intervention [10].

Giuseppe (2005) revealed that clerical activity could be unexciting that results to ambiguous analysis of the documents' consistency and completeness resulting to poor level of results of analyzing documents [11].

Methodology

This study investigated the language skills set desired of graduates who come out from universities of Bahrain with respect to their English language skills and the current perception of employers as far as employability is concerned.

Research Design

The descriptive research method was used in conducting the study. This type of research describes what exists at the time and then goes on to try and uncover new facts and meanings. The purpose of descriptive research is to observe, describe, and document aspects of a situation as it occurs. In this study, the researcher tried to determine the English language

skills gap of Bahraini college graduates when it comes to employability by conducting a survey. The quantitative research design was also used. Quantitative research is a formal, objective, systematic process which numerical data are used to obtain information. This research method was used to describe variables, to examine relationships among variables, and determine cause-and-effect interactions between variables. In this study, the researcher tried to examine relationships between the assessment of employers as to the desired and actual English language skills of fresh graduates.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study include potential employers in the labor market spread across a wide spectrum of industries in the private sector. The participants were classified according to their industries and as business owners and first line managers. The study included only those who were directly involved in recruiting, selecting and monitoring fresh Bahraini graduates.

Research Instruments

The primary data gathering instrument used in this research was a survey questionnaire focusing on the desired and actual competence of Bahraini graduates in English language skills and its importance in boosting employability chances for fresh Bahraini graduates in the job market.

The questionnaire consists of three parts, which are as follows: Part I refers to the personal information of the participants about their personal variables as age, gender, position, and level of supervision of fresh graduates. Part II deals with the desired knowledge, skills, and abilities of Bahraini graduates in English language skills. Part III deals with the actual knowledge, skills, and abilities of Bahraini graduates as perceived by potential employers.

Data Gathering Procedures

All data pertinent to the topic of the study were gathered by the researcher during the first quarter of 2017 with a sample size that will be discussed and finalized, but considering the spread of private sector businesses in Bahrain in order to conduct gap analysis survey to identify critical knowledge, skills and abilities required of fresh graduates from universities of Bahrain. The researcher personally distributed the survey instrument to the participants and thereafter retrieved the questionnaires. To assess the desired competence required of fresh graduates, the respondents were asked to indicate their perceived level of importance of the given criteria by using a 5-point scale ranging from "1-Not at all important", "2–Slightly important", "3- Moderately important", "4-Very important", and "5-Extremely important". To assess the actual or current level of knowledge, skills, and abilities of fresh graduates, the respondents will be asked to indicate their responses on the given criteria by using a 5-point scale ranging from "1-Poor", "2–Low", "3-Acceptable", "4-High", and "5-Excellent".

Statistical Treatment of Data

The information from the responses gathered from the respondents was treated statistically using the following:

1. Simple Percentage. This was used to interpret the respondents' profile in terms of age, gender and degree/ level of supervision of fresh graduates.

2. Mean. This was used to interpret the average of the respondents' response individual criteria of competence.

In interpreting the actual knowledge, skills and abilities for fresh graduates, the following table for mean ranges was used: Weight Mean Range Interpretation 5 (4.21-5.00) Extremely important 4 (3.41-4.20) Very important 3 (2.61-3.40) Moderately important 2 (1.81-2.60) and Slightly important 1 (1.00-1.80) Not at all important.

In interpreting the desired knowledge, skills and abilities of fresh graduates, the following table for mean ranges were used: Weight Mean Range Interpretation 5 (4.21 - 5.00) Excellent 4 (3.41 - 4.20) High 3 (2.61 - 3.40) Moderate/Acceptable 2 (1.81 - 2.60) and Low 1 (1.00 - 1.80) Poor.

3. T-test. This was used to determine if the two sets of responses of actual and desired are significantly different from each other.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION Findings

1. The respondents of the study include those working as leaders or managers from the various industry sectors in Bahrain. The participants were classified according to their age, gender, position level, namely – supervisor, junior manager, senior manager, and top executive, and if they have direct supervision of fresh graduates. Table 1 below shows the frequency distribution of the respondents based on age.

Age	Number of Respondents	% of Total
20 - 35 years old	22	55%
36 - 50 years old	17	42%
More than 50 years old	1	3%
Total	40	100%
	Gender	
Male	17	42%
Female	23	58%
Total	40	100%
	Position	
Top Executive	4	10%
Senior Manager	10	25%
Junior Manager	12	30%
Supervisor	14	35%
Totals	40	100%

Table 1 Respondents' Profile

Table above shows that more than half of the respondents are between 22-35 years old or 55%, female and hold supervisory positions. Claire and Hudson pointed that learning to manage people can be a process of trial and error. Some young people are able to hone their leadership skills before they enter the workplace.

Direct supervision of fresh graduates?	f	%
Yes	26	65%
No	14	35%
Totals	40	100%

Table 2.1 Frequency Distribution of the Respondents in terms of direct supervision of fresh graduates

Of all the respondents who participated, 65% have direct supervision of fresh graduates, thus, their assessments for the current English competencies of fresh graduates will be considered.

Gu and Bourne are positive that life is all about balance and graduate students should have a foresight in developing their budding career.

Table 2.2 below shows the frequency distribution of the respondents' assessment as to the **desired** English language knowledge, skills, and abilities as they enter Bahrain's labor workforce.

Position	f	%	Average	Interpretation
Extremely Important	13	33%		
Very Important	14	35%		
Moderately Important	13	33%	A	Very Important
Slightly Important	0	0%	4	very important
Not Important at all	0	0%		
Total	40	100%		

Table 2.2 Frequency Distribution of the Respondents Assessment as to the Desired English Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

All the respondents agreed that in general, English language proficiency is very important for fresh graduates as they enter the labor market regardless whatever industry they belong. An average of 4.00 proved that indeed mastery of the English language is very important. Alkourdis et. al. supported these findings and divulged that employers prioritize the students' strong engagement to profession-specific skills. Eventually, the fresh graduates are being prepared in their "well-roundedness" to get culturally fit in the workplace.

Table 2.3 below shows the frequency distribution of the respondents' assessment as to the **actual** English language knowledge, skills, and abilities as they enter Bahrain's labor workforce.

Position	f	%	Average	Interpretation		
Very High	5	19%				
High	5	19%				
Moderate/Acceptable	7	27%	2	Moderate /		
Low	3	12%	,	Acceptable		
Very Poor	6	23%				
Total	26	100%				

Table 2.3 Frequency Distribution of the Respondents Assessment as to the Actual English Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Of the 26 respondents who have direct supervision of fresh graduates, it is very hard to deduce how the fresh graduates fare in their English communication skills, as one fifth stated that the fresh graduates already have very high level of English skills, which is agreed upon by the another fifth of the respondents. However, almost 30% stated that their English competencies are already acceptable, while the rest said that the graduates have low if not very poor English language skills. Thomas et. al recommended that a person is considered employable only when he gets the necessary qualification, experience, interest, learning attitude and expertise in the field where he wants to seek employment. These requirements which include actual English knowledge, skills and abilities are prerequisites to employment.

Relationship between the Assessments of the Desired and the Actual English Competences

Table 3.1 below shows the relationship between the desired and actual English language competence of the fresh graduates in terms of their English reading skills.

Reading	Desired	Actual
Mean	3,925	2,538
Variance	0,533	1,218
Observations	40	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	39	
t Stat	5,652	
P(T<=t) one-tail	7.87976E-07	tS > tC,
t Critical one-tail	1,685	reject Ho
P(T<=t) two-tail	1.57595E-06	
t Critical two-tail	2,023	

Table 3.1 T-test result of assessments between the desired and actual English reading skills of fresh graduates

The mean evaluation of the desired English reading skills is 3.925 (very important) while the actual is evaluated at 2.54 (low). Using statistical tools to determine the relationship of the assessments, T-test results indicated that the T-Statistic value of 5.652 is greater than the T-Critical value of 2.023, thus, in this case, the null hypothesis is rejected and thereby concluded that there is a significant difference in the desired English reading skills of fresh graduates and the actual reading skills they possess. Rahman concluded that college students should be given responsibility in improving their reading skills because they should be fit nationally and internationally.

Table 3.2 below shows the relationship between the desired and actual English language competence of the fresh graduates in terms of their English writing skills.

Writing	Desired	Actual
Mean	3,85	2,423
Variance	0,644	1,134
Observations	40	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	43	
t Stat	5,840	
P(T<=t) one-tail	3.12243E-07	
t Critical one-tail	1,681	tS > tC,
P(T<=t) two-tail	6.24486E-07	
t Critical two-tail	2,017	

Table 3.2 T-test result of assessments between the desired and actual English writing skills of fresh graduates

In terms of writing skills, the mean evaluation for the desired competence is 3.85 (very important) while the actual competence is evaluated at 2.42 (low). Again, using the T-test we arrived at the calculated T-statistic value of 5.84 which is greater than the T-Critical value of 2.017. It meant that there is again a significant difference in the desired English writing skills than what the graduates possess. Linville rationalized on this notion and said that writing is not only for entry-level positions but a key for advancing a career as well.

Table 3.3 below shows the relationship between the desired and actual English language competence of the fresh graduates in terms of their English-speaking skills.

Speaking	Desired	Actual
Mean	3,775	2,808
Variance	0,589	1,282
Observations	40	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	40	
t Stat	3,823	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0,0002256	
t Critical one-tail	1,684	tS > tC,
P(T<=t) two-tail	0,0004512	
t Critical two-tail	2,021	

Table 3.3 T-test result of assessments between the desired and actual English speaking skills of fresh graduates

Desired English speaking skills are evaluated at 3.775 (very important) while actual skills are evaluated at 2.81 (moderate/acceptable). Although it seemed that the fresh graduates have acceptable English speaking skills, still, result of the T-test showed that there is a significant difference between the desired and the actual English speaking skills of the fresh graduates, evidenced by the higher T-Statistic value of 3.82 than the T-Critical value of 2.02. The GMAT emphasized the importance of speaking in the workplace. Good speaking skills provide opportunities for better understanding.

Table 3.4 below shows the relationship between the desired and actual English language competence of the fresh graduates in terms of their understanding of English documents.

Understanding English documents	Desired	Actual
Mean	3,95	2,077
Variance	0,664	0,954
Observations	40	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	47	
t Stat	8,114	
P(T<=t) one-tail	8.61101E-11	
t Critical one-tail	1,678	tS > tC,
P(T<=t) two-tail	1.7222E-10	
t Critical two-tail	2,012	

Table 3.4 T-test result of assessments between the desired and actual skills of fresh graduates in understanding English documents

The significant difference in terms of the fresh graduates' competence in understanding English documents seemed very evident by the high margin of difference between the T-Statistic value of 8.11 than the T-Critical value of 2.01. Consistently, the desired skill for understanding English documents is considered very important by all the respondents, while the actual evaluation is also considered low level of understanding English documents. Francis emphasized that there should be interventions for the students with difficulties in reading. Reading is associated with understanding. They should be inseparable.

Table 3.5 below shows the relationship between the desired and actual English language competence of the fresh graduates in terms of their analysis of English information.

Analyzing English Information	Desired	Actual
Mean	3,725	2,385
Variance	0,615	1,286
Observations	40	26
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	40	
t Stat	5,264	
P(T<=t) one-tail	2.54332E-06	
t Critical one-tail	1,684	tS > tC,
P(T<=t) two-tail	5.08663E-06	
t Critical two-tail	2,021	

Table 3.5 T-test result of assessments between the desired and actual skills of fresh graduates in analyzing English information

Lastly, when analyzing English information, fresh graduates again fell short of expectations as the actual mean of 2.38 means low skills level compared to the expected skills of 3.725, considered to be very important. Giuseppe has the similar notion that the aforesaid gap could be traced from the wearisome activity of analyzing documents.

CONCLUSION

- 1. Most of the respondents although they are young and female, they are on the front lines and holding executive positions. They are responsive to a wide range of clientele. They possess full potential; they can contribute their best working in a team.
- 2. Bahraini graduates' English learning abilities can be tailored even being mentored by young executives. They are influenced by the kind of entrepreneurial communication styles their mentors have.
- 3. Employers in the labor market have certain expectations toward new graduates and to have a good command of English language is very important tool in the workplace. Graduates usually exhibit their employability skills learned from the university.
- 4. Business Sectors discern the English knowledge, skills and abilities or deficiencies of the interested applicants these are some of the criteria for evaluating the potentials of the applicant with regards to the contributions that they can bring to the company or business.
- 5. Poor level of academic English reading proficiency indicates that there is insufficient amount of emphasizing to the learners the importance of reading. An extensive amount of reading tasks will develop learners' mastery of the required skills for reading.
- 6. Most fresh graduates could have lapses during their university learning period particularly on the courses related to writing in English; consequently, the inability to write well disappoints employers.
- 7. A number of fresh graduates can speak in English that makes a positive factor in the workplace. To enunciate well is an advantage for professional performance. Fresh graduates should become familiar with the elements of communication.

- 8. The educational background of the fresh graduates in relation to their work matters. There are gaps identified between the expectations of the participants to the results of the assessments of the graduates in understanding documents.
- 9. The nature of work as exhibited in the job description of the fresh graduates is a factor whether the fresh graduates would be effective to the workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Bahraini graduates regardless of their background should continue developing their English macro skills even after finishing degree.
- 2. Bahraini graduates should increase their interest in learning English particularly in dealing with any business transactions; consequently, their English abilities will be enhanced and improved by their exposure in any situation.
- 3. Bahraini graduates should possess English language knowledge and abilities to keep employed. English proficiency both in reading, speaking and writing is essential for career growth.
- 4. Bahraini graduates seeking for employment should have initial self assessment regarding their employability skills which include entrepreneurial English language competence in English.
- 5. Bahraini graduates although done with their tertiary education should be encouraged to develop the habit of reading in English.
- 6. Bahraini graduates should increase their writing proficiency level so that they can cope with the demands in the workplace where writing is a necessity.
- 7. Bahraini graduates should have more exposure in speaking situations. Educators as well as those in business sectors should train students and fresh graduates who are already in the work force on developing confidence in speaking.
- 8. Bahraini graduates should go through a lot of reading particularly those which are technical documents. They should get abreast with the latest associated with Familiarity on the features and aspects of document forms and characteristics documents is essential for keeping employment.
- 9. Bahraini graduates should be engaged in a dynamic work environment. The employers themselves should regularly monitor the performance of the fresh graduates and encourage them to perform better by going beyond the expectations of the employers. Analyzing documents takes an in-depth understanding. The fresh graduates should maximize all the resources for producing quality outputs.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY – DESIRED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS AS PERCEIVED BY PRIVATE SECTOR MANAGERS

This is an exercise to correctly identify from you, a practicing manager, the desired English Language skills that are important for fresh young graduates from Universities of Bahrain. Kindly take some time and put in your thoughts which will be very valuable for us to conduct a thorough gap analysis.

PART 1								
NAME (OPTIONAL) :	AGE	E:		GENDER	<u>.</u>			
POSITION:								
LINE FUNCTION OR STAFF:								
DO YOU DIRECTLY SUPERVISE FR	ESH GRADUA	ATES?	YES	NO				
OVERALL, IN A SCALE OF 1-5, V	VHAT GRADI	E WOULD		Y	OU GIVE	A FRESH G	RADUATE 1	IN TERMS OF
DESIRED ENGLISH LANGUAGE	SKILLS THA	T YOU W	OULD EX	KPECT IN	HIM / HEI	R WHO HAS	GRADUATE	D FROM THE
UNIVERSITY								
	1	2	3	4	5			
OVERALL, IN A SCALE OF 1-5	, WHAT GR	RADE WO	ULD YO	U GIVE	A FRESH	GRADUATE	IN TERMS	OF <u>ENGLISH</u>
LANGUAGESKILLS THAT THEY	POSSESS W	HO HAS GI	RADUATI	ED FROM	THE UNIV	ERSITY		
	1	2	3	4	5			
						•		

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS: KINDLY TICK THE BOX (S) WHICH YOU THINK IS **NECESSARY** FOR A FRESH GRADUATE TO INCREASE EMPLOYABILITY IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

	Strongly agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Strongly disagree 1
READING					
WRITING					
SPEAKING					
UNDERSTANDING ENG. DOCUMENTS					
ANALYSING ENGLISH INFORAMATION					

Any specific comment on any of the	criteria above?	

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS: KINDLY TICK THE BOX (S) WHICH YOU THINK IS POSSESSED BY A FRESH GRADUATE

	Strongly agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Strongly disagree 1
READING					
WRITING					
SPEAKING					
UNDERSTANDING ENG. DOCUMENTS					
ANALYSING ENGLISH INFORAMATION					

Any specific comment	on any of the criteria above?	

What types of courses do you believe would better enhance A FRESH GRADUATE'S EMPLOYABILITY in terms of English language competency?

•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•

Any additional market?	comments yo	ou would	like to	share in	relation	to improving	g employability	of fresh	Bahraini	graduates	in the	labor
										-		
Thank you for yo	our time.											