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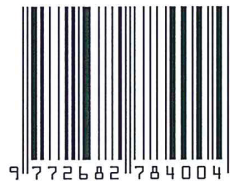Dr Azita Ahmad Zawawi, Senior Lecturer
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TABLE
of CONTENTS

GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY: ENHANCING STUDENTS' OVERALL PERFORMANCES

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to identify the employability factors emphasised by the future employers as well as higher education institutions. The factors mostly indicate the importance of balance between students' overall performance in both academic (technical academic ability) and non academic (soft skills) performances. This paper is based on secondary data from past literature on graduates' employability factors, through meta-analytic approach. The model was developed based on prior researches on employability factors and it focuses on how to stimulate students' overall performance. The L.E.A.S. (Learning, Exposure, Assimilate and Stimulate) model was developed to balance academic and non academic performances hence improving the graduates' employability. This model requires participation from three main key players known as students, universities and employers in order to stimulate students' ultimate performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of highly demanding labour market, it is difficult for students to secure a job once they graduate. Higher Education Ministry from Department of Higher Education reported in their Education Ministry's 2018 Graduate Tracer Study that, 60% of students from 51,000 graduates produced by both 21 public-sector universities and 38 private-sector universities were unemployed for one year after completeing their study (D'Silva, 2020). Graduating from a university will not guarantees ones job position. Number of graduating students are rising year by year and this will create a highly competitive environment in the labour market. Additionally, the sputtering economy makes it difficult for the young graduates to be employed by the employer. Consequently, the higher number of unemployed university graduates will creates inescapable management cost to the society as a whole (Blackburn Robert, 1999).

Nevertheless, there are various reasons for the high number of unemployement among university graduates. The employers' demand and requirements are getting difficult to be fulfilled. Aside from having good academic grades, it is important for students to be equipped with sufficient skills and ability to survive in a working environment as being demanded by most employers. Employability skills are an added advantage to the graduates as this will help them to compete and to be considered as potential candidates for respective employers. Graduates must be capable enough to meet the employability criteria set by employers. They are expected to be eager to learn and must be able to develop attributes, techniques and experiences for the labour market(Okolie, Nwosu, & Mlanga, 2019).

Apparently, there is a growing concern among future employers on the skills possessed by the young graduates as prospective candidates in the labour market. It is important to produce graduates with outstanding performance for the labour market. Higher Education Institutions are required to provide reliable and skilful candidates for future employers. Okolie et al. (2019)stated that the demand of labour market can be fulfilled by the Higher Education System planning and strategies. Both academic and non academic performance need to be polished and improved in line with the demand. Therefore, the key to employability should be shared with universities and students periodically. It is the universities' responsibility to continuosly produce a generation of marketable and employable graduates. Previous studies have revealed that most of the graduates produced by universities are often revealed that they do not meet the criteria set by the prospective employers (Poon, 2014; Verma et al., 2018; Winterton & Turner Jason, 2019). There is a need to match the expectations on employability criteria from three main key players in the labour market namely universities, employers and students. The ultimate aim of this paper is to identify key employability factors and to develop a useful model that can be used as guidance by the three main key players as a whole. This paper helps to generate a formal guidance to the key players on how to fill the gap in the labour market due to the unmet needs and expectations. The model created will assist those key players to boost the overall performance of students both in academic and non academic area and increase their chances to be employed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Often, the students' performances are evaluated solely based on their academic performance. The academic institution may sometimes overlook the importance of the developing students' generic skills that will enhance students' credibility once they graduate. Relying on good academic performance is not enough to help students secure their position in any particular company. Employers are now demanding that students be fully equipped with soft skills and they are no longer emphasising technical academic skills (Chia, 2005; Velasco, 2012). Besides, an outstanding overall performances both in technical academic skills and soft skills will not only help them in the world of employment but also in their life long learning (Fallows & Steven, 2000). It is important for the students to have a balanced set of skills as a preparation to enter the working environment.

Technical academic skill and academic performance are often used as basic selection criteria by most employers. Pool and Sewell (2007) wrote that academic grades and aptitude is the measurement used by employers; how the students have completed their degree and how knowledgeable they are in their field of study. The first element or criteria that employers look for in a candidate selection process is the academic results of the students. Jobs are primarily offered to students with excellent academic records and this would take place even before they graduate (Johnes, Taylor, & Ferguson, 1987). Mason, Williams, and Cranmerb (2009) found a positive relationship between students with good academic grades and employment opportunity. However, students' ability in adapting and blend into the working environment is not visible through academic performance. As a result, the students' soft skills would be tested and verified during the evaluation and selection process.

There are several literatures that support the need for soft skills in future graduates (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Velasco, 2012; Chew, Zain, & Hassan, 2013; Maelah, Mohamed, Ramli, & Aman, 2014). The soft or generic skills is the skills which can support students in any discipline, and which can potentially be applied to a range of contexts; in higher education or the workplace (Pool & Sewell, 2007). The soft skills would involve teamwork and computer skills (DeBerg & Chapman, 2012), communication skills, leadership and teamwork, and self-management (Maelah et al., 2014), problem solving skills and interpersonal skills, (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013) as well as other relevant skills. Nevertheless, there were also studies which support the need for combination of both academic and soft skills (Chia, 2005;

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JOURNAL VOICE OF ACADEMIA, VOL.17, ISSUES. 1. 2021, P.P 63 - 72

Voice of Academia
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Velasco, 2012). Henceforth, students' with outstanding performances in both technical academic skills and soft skills will be a credible and reliable sources of labour to the market.

3. OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to provide guidance and basis for the key players;university, employer and student to strategise and enhance the students' overall performance.The opportunities of the students' employement will expand and widen. This paper will also identify the key factors of employability and a model/framework that will enhance the students' overall performances will be developed and this hopefully would lead to an array of employment opportunity.

4. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

4.1 The Employability Factors

Meta-analysis of eight past studies on factors of employability is summarised in Table 1. The studies outlined the skills and knowledge required by most employers. Pool and Sewell (2007) identified five factors that will enhance students' opportunity to be employed in their model. The factors are known as degree subject knowledge, generic skills, emotional intelligence and career development learning. The model balances the technical academic ability with soft skills. If students posses these four factors, students will have high self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem when they enter the working environment. Velasco (2012) on the other hand explained the importance of and emphasises students' soft skills in which employers seek for in new graduates rather than sole reliance on students' academic grades. The soft skills identified were communication, teamwork, leadership, human relations skills, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of software applications which will enable them to work efficiently. This is supported by the study of Finch et al. (2013) which ranked soft skills as the most important skill and that is highly demanded by employers followed by problem-solving skills, job-specific functional skills, pre-graduate experience and lastly the academic reputation.

Therefore, soft skills and other relevant skills are highly demanded by employers aside from good academic grades. Chia (2005) explained that academic grades and extra-curricular activities were used to secure a position in the initial job selection process while soft skills were tested in the final recruitment process. This indicates that, academic result was used as basis of selection and candidates' soft skills were tested to ensure that they have the skills needed and this would be verified through their ability to interact, adapt and present themselves.

Fallows and Steven (2000) identified other employability factors. Their study explains from the universities' perspective in producing employable and marketable graduates. Universities are required to incorporate employability skills into the curriculum. The employability skills identified were the ability to retrieve and handle information load, presenting and delivering ideas, planning and problem solving, as well as social development and interaction. The universities are expected to incorporate these skills in the curriculum and syllabus.

On top of that, students with great emotional intelligence will be able to adapt and adjust themselves in both learning and working environment. Chew et al. (2013) found that student with high emotional intelligence performs well academically. Indirectly, emotional intelligence will help students to be mentally and emotionally prepared in every difficult situation they would face. Another perspective was found in a study by Maelah et al. (2014) where students with real-life working experience (internship, part time job and others) are more likely to be employed. The short and brief experience gained during internship will especially

help develop the students' soft skills; which are required by the employer. Furthermore, Mason et al. (2009) strongly support that employability skills are best learned in workplaces rather than in classroom settings. Thus, employer and university will definitely used the internship as a platform to develop students' skill and to boost their overall performances. Table 1 summarised employability factors that employers will take into account in assessing potential candidates which leads to the development of the hypotheses below:

H1: Graduates employability depends on both students' academic (technical academic ability) and non academic (soft skills) performances.

Table 1: Content Analysis and Summary of Key to Employability

Sources	Key to Employability
Pool and Sewell (2007)	Degree subject knowledge
	Generic skills
	Emotional intelligence
	Career Development Learning
Fallows and Steven (2000)	Employability skills :
	- Retrieval and handling of information - Communication and presentation - Planning and problem solving - Social development and interaction
Chew, Zain, and Hassan (2013)	Emotional intelligence
Maelah, Mohamed, Ramli, and Aman (2014)	Real-life working experience
Velasco (2012)	Soft skills :
	- communication, teamwork, leadership, human relations skills, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of software applications. Good academic records
Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, and Zehner (2013)	Soft-skills
	Problem-solving skills
	Job-specific functional skills
	Pre-graduate experience
	Academic reputation.
Chia (2005)	Emotional intelligence
	Extra-curricular Activities

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JOURNAL VOICE OF ACADEMIA, VOL.17, ISSUES. 1. 2021, P.P 63 - 72

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Academic Performance	
Mason, Williams, and Cranmerb (2009)	Structured work experience
	Employer involvement in degree course design and delivery

4.2 Conceptual Framework

4.2.1 The Model

In Table 1, the factors are categorised into four main elements as in Table 2. The four elements are used as a framework that will enhance the student's performances (academic and non academic) and increase their chance to be employed. The four elements identified will help to balance the students' academic performance and non academic performance both directly and indirectly while involving all key players (university, employer and student).

Table 2 : Four Main Elements

Learning	Exposure	Assimilate	Stimulate
Degree subject knowledge	Career development learning	Extra-curricular activities	Employability skills / Soft skills
Academic reputation/ performances	Pre-graduate experience		Emotional intelligence
Good academic records	Real-life working experience		Problem-solving skills
			Job-specific functional skills

The first element is through learning. This is to equip the students with as much knowledge as possible and ensuring they are well versed in their field of study. This will help to build a good base of knowledge for the students as well as to increase their reputation academically. This element coverage is the depth of knowledge in their field of study, their outstanding academic performances and records. Exposure is recognised as the second element. It is to expose the student with outside environment (career line) and preparing them; to familiarise them with the working environment before entering the labour market. This is where students would be guided on prospective careers that are relevant and related to them, as well as early exposure in the working environment through industrial training or internship. The third element is to assimilate whatever material or matter that can be used to help nurture students to be skilful and competent. The adaptation can either be both from employer to university environment and vice versa. For instance, activities conducted through embedding cooperation with industries in extra-curricular activities, curriculum review between universities and industry and other relevant activities. Stimulate is the last element; when the universities equip themselves with various strategies to develop the students' skills as required by the employer. It is both the employers' and university's responsibilities to create a credible and marketable students with a full set of hard skills and soft skills.

These four elements are illustrated in Figure 1 as a framework that will enhance and boost the students' overall performances which will help to increase students' employability. This framework is also known as L.E.A.S. (Learning, Exposure, Assimilate and Stimulate) model.

This framework requires the involvement of three key players which are students, university, and employer.

Figure 1: The L.E.A.S. model
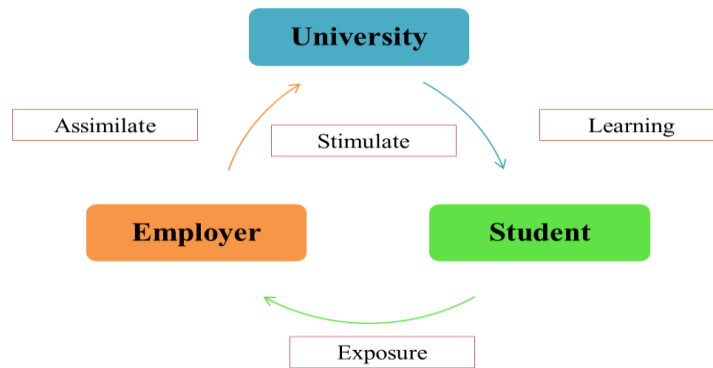
4.2.2 Propositions

This paper now offers three propositions based on each key player. The proposition is explained in the next paragraph.

Proposition 1 : University as the main driver need to be proactive and innovative in each of their strategies.

Universities should be able to produce marketable and employable graduates. Universities act as the main driver in this model due the limited awareness possess by the students on their surroundings like country's economic condition, trend of the industries, the stiffness of labour market, government's policy on employement and many others. It is said that universities have high responsibilities to nurture the students with meaningful information related to the current market situation. Rae (2008) identified the role of universities as producer of employable graduates by offering them the opportunities to understand, providing effective support through sufficient information and explanation on emerging trends in economy, prospect industries, labour markets and carear pathways. The linkage that the universities have with the employers is an opportunity for universities to create a pool of highly employable candidates for the employers. The universities can use the feedback and concern from the employer to narrow the gap between employers' expectation and candidates capability produced by the universities(Rae, 2008; Winterton & Turner Jason, 2019).

Proper strategies and plan should be in place to ensure that their students are well equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills. Universities should be proactive in finding the best way to improve their students' performance and be innovative in each decision. Among the proposed way is by using non-traditional teaching method (non-text book teaching method) (Mason et al., 2009; DeBerg & Chapman, 2012), assimilating the soft skills into student's extra-curricular activities (Chia, 2005), conducting entry admission interview to get a brief view on students's existing skills before they start studying (Seow & Pan, 2014), adding new course(s) or modifying course content according to employers' suggestion (Mason et al., 2009), changing teaching style; from classroom teaching to two way communication between students and teacher (Klaveren, 2011) and many other relevant strategies.

Voice of
Academia
e-ISSN: 2682-7840

JOURNAL VOICE OF ACADEMIA, VOL.17, ISSUES. 1. 2021, P.P 63 - 72

Voice of
Academia
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A significant suggestion proposed by Jones (2013) is to integrate learning and critical thinking strategies with technical course content through the introduction of proactive academic support program. This will enhance universities' ability to produce employable graduates that are fully equipped with all the required skills and knowledge. Besides, it is essential for universities to consider the educators' or teachers' perspectives, ideas and motivation in order to improve the students' overall performances. As Figlio and Kenny (2007) found, incentives provided to the educators, especially in monetary terms will contribute to the increase of students performances. In other words, the educators are motivated to give their best in teaching the students if they were given incentives. It is an added drive or motivation for them to conduct their task as an educator. Universities may consider this as part of their initiative in improving the students' performances.

Other than that, universities need to provide a conducive learning environment to the students since it is one of the determinants of students' general satisfaction towards the services provided by the universities. Oja's (2011) study found the link between students satisfaction on the universities services with students' overall performance. Student centeredness, instructional effectiveness, academic advising/counselling, registration effectiveness, service excellence, individual concerns and campus climate play a role and will determine the students' overall performance in the university. Therefore, it is essential for the universities to improve their services to ensure that their students are able to learn and grow in the best environment.

Proposition 2 : Future employers to cooperate with universities to produce skilful and employable graduates.

The employers should be cooperating with universities and it can be done in various ways. Poon (2014) investigated the perspectives from multiple stakeholders on graduates skills produced by the universities. The concern comes mostly from prospective employer where they agreed that lack of employability skills make it harder for them to recruit the young graduates as their performance were not up to their expectations. Employers dissatisfaction on graduates' skills and compentencies can be used as a source of improvement for universities. In fact, they can act as an agent to supply relevant information based on prior experience dealing with young graduates and ultimately help the universities to produce employable graduates as what have been demanded by the employer.

A joint collaboration between prospective employers and universities can be seen as one of the solution. Internship (Finch et al., 2013; Maelah et al., 2014), career talk (Pool & Sewell, 2007), and workshop are some of the usual collaborations between universities and employers. Mason et al. (2009) proposed that potential employers be involved in course design and delivery. Through these methods, employers may contribute and provide relevant input for the course content according to the future employment prospects, employers may also contribute on students' project by supplying materials and ideas, to be guest lecturers, and be directly involved as members of the course advisory panels.

Through this collaboration, the employers can be assertive with their requirements and universities will be able to teach and train students with the required skills before they enter the job market. Being informed of the requirement is better than blaming the universities and students for failing to meet their demand; being well equipped and skilful graduates. This will avoid the lack of suitable candidates and avoid high turnover rate when employees fail to meet the employers' demand , they either risk losing time finding new employees or money training the new employees.

Voice of Academia
e-ISSN: 2682-7840

JOURNAL VOICE OF ACADEMIA, VOL.17, ISSUES. 1. 2021, P.P 63 - 72

Voice of Academia
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Proposition 3 : Students as future graduate should be well prepared and ready to enter the labour market

Solely relying on universities and employers alone will not ensure employable candidates to be available in the job market. It is of utmost importance that the students to take action and be proactive in preparing themselves. Students are expected to be highly self-driven and motivated in improving themselves as it will help them face adversities. As explained by Biggs (2013), students of Gen Y are apathetic in their future working environments. Their inner confidence and self motivation are needed in this situation to ensure that they would fulfil the job market demand. (Yizhong et al. (2017)) identified that graduates with positive attitude, siginificant efforts on job searching and high confidence in performing the job will increase their chance to be employed. Students need to actively participate and be responsible in learning and developing their own skills. Engaging in whatever activities conducted by universities and actively exposing themselves with the labour market will.

5. RECOMMENDATION

Graduates employability may be influenced by factors other than students' overall performance. Current demands of the job market should be taken into consideration as it will impact the demands for graduates; with a certain set of skils or knowledge. If the economy is too stiff, employers are likely to put off hiring new staff. Furthermore, the characteristics of Gen Y should be contemplated as they are the future. In sum, current demands of the job market and characteristics of Gen Y may be part of influencing factors in graduates' employability. Besides, a cynical view from other important key players should be considered. Government's involvement is also vital in helping universities and employers through their policies and agendas.

6. CONCLUSION

In this competitive age, students with an excellent and outstanding overall performance both in academic and non academic will have a better chance at employment. Employers are now demanding for students with sufficient technical and soft skills to be part of their organisation. Hence, it is essential for universities to nurture and polish the skills required while producing knowledgeable and academically excellent graduates. A balance between academic and non academic performances is a must for each and every student. Lacking in any one of it will lessen the students' chance at employment. A perfect cooperation and collaboration between the three key players will ensure that the students are employable despite the presence of fierce competition.

The L.E.A.S. model provides a basic framework for universities, employers and students to follow in order to increase the students' employability chances. This model is proposed to offer a solution in balancing the two different performances; which are technical academic skills (academic) and soft skills (non-academic). It aims to ensure well balanced students are produced and that they will be able to adapt and change accordingly in a challenging and competitive work environment.

It is recommended that key players implement this model. Information and data should be collected from the three key players to confirm the suitability of the suggested framework. Further improvement may be administered based on the collected data.

Voice of Academia
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JOURNAL VOICE OF ACADEMIA, VOL.17, ISSUES. 1. 2021, P.P 63 - 72

Voice of Academia
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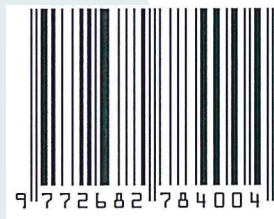
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