

The Importance of Employability Skills to TVET and non-TVET Graduates

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on employability skills, the differences between job and employability skills, the importance of employability skills for TVET and non-TVET graduates, the consequences of fresh graduates not having adequate skills to join the workforce, and employers' expectations of fresh graduates. Twenty-one diploma students were involved in the study. Convenient sampling was used. A set of questionnaires with employability skills was distributed to respondents. The respondents were asked to rate their employability skills based on their importance. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data. The survey's findings show that communication skills are the most crucial employability skills, followed by self-management, problem-solving, organization, planning, learning, teamwork, leadership, and technology. Findings from the study are also in line with Yorke and Knight's employability theory, whereby graduates believe that a set of achievements, which includes skills, understandings, and personal attributes, will make them more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen careers. Thus, universities can assist students in becoming more employable by emphasizing developing their meta-cognitive skills, learning how to learn, and boosting their self-esteem.

Keywords: employability skills, marketability, non-technical skills, Non-TVET, TVET, job-ready skills

INTRODUCTION

Many fresh graduates, either TVET or non-TVET, face difficulties finding a job matching their degree qualifications. After spending many years in their tertiary education, they expect to get a job that suits their qualifications (Latisha & Surina, 2010). Finding a job that fits their qualifications is one of the problems that graduates face when they graduate. As per the Graduate Tracer Study conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in 2021, 41,467 graduates from Malaysia, or 14.5% of the total, were still without jobs (Muhammad Hisyam, 2022).

Unfortunately, many of these graduates work in a field unrelated to their study area. Many of these graduates are frustrated as they cannot apply what they have learned at their tertiary education level. Besides, they cannot perform their tasks well because they do not have good employability skills,

affecting their job performance as they take time to learn new things from the new field they venture. In addition, from the employers' perspectives, they expect to welcome their future job candidates who are well-equipped with the knowledge needed to perform their tasks without having to spend more money and time on training these fresh graduates. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability involves three skills: securing a job in the first place, keeping a job, and, if necessary, finding a new one. Therefore, good employability skills are essential for any graduate to secure a good job and excel in the workplace.

Objective

The paper aims to highlight students' knowledge of employability skills. It also aims to highlight the importance of employability skills to them.

Issue

There are apparent differences between the practical knowledge and abilities that universities teach and those required in the workplace. Employers frequently voice concerns about graduates' shortcomings, such as their lack of critical employability abilities or skills (Pham & Udoh, 2021). Besides, one of the biggest causes of graduates' difficulties getting employment in Malaysia is a lack of English proficiency (Azreen Hani, 2024; Mohamad et al., 2014). In addition, having poor communication skills is another issue fresh graduates face, as they cannot secure an excellent job within 3-6 months of graduation. "The inaccurate vocabulary (clarity), incomplete sentences (conciseness), inability to provide detailed answers (completeness), and error in grammar in the utterances and sentences (correctness) were found in the communication skills of these graduates" (Krishnan et al., 2019).

METHOD

Through observations from past teaching experience on proficiency courses in English, the researcher notices that many students are unaware of the importance of employability skills, and some do not know what they are. To gather information on which skills or employability skills are most important, a set of questionnaires was distributed to 21 respondents. The respondents (convenient sampling) were asked to rank ten employability skills from the most important to the least important. Henceforward, it is hoped that they get some ideas on what employability skills are and why they are essential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The marketability of graduates is impacted by their employability skills, which raises concerns in the higher education sector. A survey revealed that employability qualities like teamwork, flexibility, critical thinking, leadership, and communication are weak points for TVET graduates (Nur 'Adinin Syamil & Mohd Asri, 2023) and non-TVET graduates (Kaur & Kaur, 2008). A suitable and relevant education system must be established to develop competitive and resilient TVET and non-TVET graduates. Besides, employers highly value hiring people with creative and inventive talents in today's contemporary industry. Employees must be imaginative and creative thinkers to generate ideas, as these concepts and novelty can fundamentally alter the course of the business. As a result, the business may find it challenging to innovate and may even lose out to rival businesses. The workforce needs to be made up of imaginative and creative workers (Din et al., 2020).

Job Skills vs Employability Skills

There are distinctions between job skills and employability skills. Job or work skills are required for the day-to-day work activities and are unique to a role or industry. They are frequently obtained by formal education, hands-on training, or work experience. Conversely, employability skills help people succeed in any professional setting. Both skills are vital for the workplace and human daily interactions. Employability skills, often job-ready skills, are necessary for students to equip themselves with the knowledge and abilities necessary to succeed as competitive and capable workers once their education is over (Mohamed et al., 2020).

Employability skills are also known as soft skills. Employability is defined as being qualified or appropriate for work following graduation. They are a collection of employable abilities and essential character traits highly sought by employers and necessary for productive work output. These fundamental qualities and competencies cut across certain professions, sectors, and educational fields. “Employability skills significantly boost a person’s marketability” (Nicholas, 2023). According to Monash University (2023), employability skills include “communication, creativity and innovation, initiative and enterprise, professionalism, planning and organization, problem identification and solution, teamwork, intercultural competence, use of tools and technology.” According to Benjamin et al. (2013), employability skills are a combination of hard and soft skills or competencies essential for workers.” The globe is going through considerable changes in the coming twenty-first century, like Industrial Revolution 4.0, which implements automation and technological advancement, changing the view of employability abilities (Nur et al., 2023).

Why are Employability Skills Important?

Employability skills are important, especially for fresh graduates (either TVET or non-TVET), as these skills will help them to survive, strive, compete, and excel in their workplace. However, these fresh graduates often feel overwhelmed, bewildered, unsatisfied, and disoriented in many circumstances by the real world. According to Molinsky and Pisman (2019), the main reason these people struggle is not generational but cultural: the transition between college and the professional world. When team members have diverse backgrounds and cultures, they need to have good communication skills to enable effective job coordination. Ineffective communication can hinder work output and possibly lead to miscommunication among staff members (Krishnan et al., 2019). Besides, when one co-worker’s cultural background causes him or her to think differently from another, problems can occur. Because of this, the organization can gain from understanding multicultural communication at work and how to handle people without offending them in several ways.

Employability skills are job readiness skills that help workers to connect with co-workers. In the real working world, almost all types of jobs require good teamwork and team players. Thus, having good teamwork will help fresh graduates complete their tasks efficiently and effectively. In the workplace, each worker needs to be a part of and should understand his role within his team. Solving problems is another skill that helps workers, especially when they lead specific projects. Sometimes, they must be proactive, making decisions without consulting their superiors. As a result, they must make responsible choices for their task and career. Besides making responsible choices, they also need to be independent and can take charge of their career. They should occasionally ‘upgrade’ themselves by taking courses and training to equip themselves with the latest information on job-related aspects, especially technological aspects. Otherwise, they will be left behind in today’s digitalized era, as most tasks are performed using information technology (IT) and artificial intelligence (AI).

Artificial intelligence (AI) will become increasingly significant in the future. This also holds for many other industries that rely on information technology (IT). When artificial intelligence (AI)

first emerged a decade ago, it was a thing outside of science fiction. Today, we utilize AI technology without ever realizing it, from automation to face and speech recognition to intelligence gathering. Furthermore, conventional computer technologies have been replaced by AI and Machine Learning (M.L.), which has changed how many industries operate daily. Modernizing finance, healthcare, research, and industry have all benefited from leading AI's quick changes.

What Will Happen If Graduates are not Equipped with These Employability Skills?

One of the impacts of graduates' lack of employability skills is that they will remain unemployed. When this happens, it will further create social and economic problems for the nation. "Unemployment may be generally viewed as an economic issue, but its impacts are greater than that as it affects mental health, stress levels and consequently an individual's quality of life, as well as impacting community" (Nga et al., 2021). In addition, failing to answer any basic questions on the field the graduates studied also may cause the problem of not being selected for employment. In one case portrayed by Abdullah Shibli (2024) in the Bangladeshi context where, one professor who was from the North-eastern University's Business School in Boston, Massachusetts, attended one work assignment in Dhaka and was asked by his family friend to find a job for their son at an Anglo-American Corporation. However, the applicant who graduated with his MBA from a well-known private institution failed in his job interview due to his failure to respond to some fundamental accounting questions.

Job mismatch is another concern when graduates lack employability skills (Singh, 2022). The term "job mismatch" describes the absence of a degree in the workplace, which has been linked to unemployment. In recent years, there has been an increase in concern about the issue of job mismatch and its impact on graduate unemployment. Employment mismatches are a novel, intricate, and ever-evolving concept affecting the labor market. In recent years, there has been an increase in concern about the issue of job mismatch and its impact on graduate unemployment. A novel, intricate, and ever-evolving concept, employment mismatches affect the labor market and the overall economy. An imbalance between job applicants and available positions is a work mismatch. Applicants may experience difficulties expressing themselves during a job interview as the position they apply for does not match their degree. Failing to impress their potential employers as they lack knowledge in the field they want to venture into may result in not being selected for the position.

What Do Employers Look in Employees?

Fresh graduates need to equip themselves not only with IT skills but also need to be able to be proactive. This means they should be able to anticipate the challenges in the world's economy that will affect their work or career and the organization they serve. Research findings indicate that tolerance for uncertainty, leadership, adaptability, moral behavior, and critical and creative thinking are the top five qualities valued above all others. Consequently, to satisfy the demands of potential employers, students must enhance their non-technical skills throughout their academic careers (Lim & Tan, 2023). Non-technical skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, moral ethics, leadership, teamwork, self-motivation, lifelong learning, and information management skills.

Nowadays, living in a competitive world requires fresh, autonomous graduates, not followers. Either TVET or non-TVET graduates need to be independent and proactive. TVET graduates, in the opinion of industry experts, need to possess strong social and communication skills. At the college level, these abilities must be acquired directly and indirectly. Besides, introducing additional initiatives and activities to enhance graduates' capacity for communication and social interaction while in school is also important. (Noorazman et al., 2017; Nur A'dnin Syamil & Mohd Asri, 2023). In addition, the essential elements of appreciating skills include assessing and responding to novel ideas, forming

conclusions, thinking and acting critically, identifying one's talents and emulating others, and valuing professional behavior. These abilities help graduates improve their chances of finding employment. Digital abilities combined with essential soft skills improve a person's marketability and open doors in the ever-changing job market.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following results were obtained based on the questionnaires distributed to the respondents.

Table 1: respondents' ranking of employability skills according to their importance.

EMPLOYABILITY SKILL	PERCENTAGE (%)
Communication	57.2
Teamwork	4.76
Reliability	0
Problem solving	23.76
Organization and planning	14.28
Initiative	0
Self-management	19.05
Leadership	4.76
Learning	14.28
Technology	4.76

Results from the survey show that the most critical employability skill perceived by respondents is communication skill (57.2%). It is followed by problem-solving (23.76%), self-management (19.05%), organization and planning and learning (14.28%) respectively, and teamwork, leadership, and technology (4.76%) respectively. According to the respondents, reliability and initiative skills were the least necessary.

Previous research indicated that basic skills, critical thinking, personal quality, resource and capability, interpersonal, information, and system technology abilities were the most employable skills examined in the Malaysian setting (Nur et al., 2023). In addition, Kapur (2020) claims that practical communication skills are essential for improving an individual's knowledge and comprehension of how to carry out job responsibilities in an orderly fashion and contribute to the success of the workplace. People know they must use their education and talents to perform their job duties when organizations hire them. Moreover, they recognize that effective communication is essential for accomplishing professional objectives, fostering a sense of fulfillment in the workplace, and improving the general operation of businesses. Regular emphasis on improving communication skills is vital for all organization members.

Li (2022) listed complex problem-solving as ranked number 1 in 2015 and 2020 based on the review of reports of the top 10 skills on reskilling and upskilling a future-ready workforce. Respondents in this survey also claimed that problem-solving skills are one of the most important employability skills sought by employers. Thus, the finding is in line with Li (2022). Besides, Hasanuzzaman & Nanta (2023), in their systematic literature review on research between 2010 and 2019 found that the top ten skills that are commonly cited are problem-solving (12 studies), communication (11 studies), adaptability (10 studies), teamwork (10 studies), analytical and critical thinking (9 studies), ready to learn (10 studies), ethics and integrity (9 studies), interpersonal (8 studies), leadership (8 studies), and ICT skills (8 studies). In addition to the ten most in-demand abilities, other traits employers value include initiative and innovation, persistence, professionalism, emotional intelligence, time management, appearance, accountability, etc. The recent survey also indicates that the respondents

observe these skills as essential employability skills (organization and planning, self-management and learning, problem-solving skills, and communication).

In addition, initiative was not seen as an essential skill by the respondents in this survey. The initiative shows that one is eager to work and look for new challenges. Another skill that respondents do not see as necessary is reliability or dependability. Employers must have confidence in their workforce, knowing that workers will do their duties on schedule (Kelly, 2024). They are looking for workers who can be trusted to do the job at hand. Thus, these respondents need to be made aware that they need to be proactive, independent, and reliable in the workplace to improve their performance and achieve the company's goal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the government implement laws and establish financial agencies that support professional and educational organizations and institutions to broaden their offerings in teaching and training. Strengthening partnerships with industries is an approach that should be highly supported. Universities' teaching and learning curricula need to shift from emphasizing students' training solely through human capital to embracing a variety of resources, many of which should go beyond degrees and skills.

It is also necessary for formal teaching and learning programs to place more attention and promotion on career services. Lastly, students are significant stakeholders who should bear greater responsibility for controlling their careers. It is recommended that students take an active role in participating in more pertinent extracurricular and curricular activities. This will allow them to network with key stakeholders in their field of study and gain insights into possible industries. Additionally, because the labor market today is highly competitive, students must master resource allocation and resiliency strategies.

Access and equal opportunity to all students in English is deemed essential to identify the main problem of being not proficient in English. This hinders graduates' opportunity to be employed. Thus, programs like the Professional Training and Education for Growing Entrepreneurs (PROTÉGÉ) were introduced to give exposure to graduates as these programs provide them with the requisite job experience by placing them in government-affiliated businesses, departments, and agencies. Up to 5,000 unemployed graduates will receive assistance under the ministry's Ready To Work initiative from PROTÉGÉ, a rebranding of Skim Latihan 1Malaysia. This is an almost 60% increase over the 3,000 graduates who received assistance the previous year. Inadequate English language skills and a mismatch in skills reduce graduates' marketability.

Education institutions should offer a well-rounded educational program that integrates employability skills into the curriculum to improve graduate employability as a critical component. To help graduates develop employability skills, educational institutions at the vocational level must be transformed into centers of lifelong learning. It is necessary to ensure a positive alignment between the employability skills and the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment processes before integrating them. The learning objectives for each program should clearly state which employability skills are needed. In order to improve graduates' employability skills, educational institutions should take a comprehensive and integrated strategy.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted to gain respondents' knowledge of employability skills. It also tries to let the respondents know how important it is to have these skills. The study found that respondents believe communication skills are the most crucial employability skills, followed by problem-solving, self-

management, organization, planning, learning, teamwork, leadership, and technology. According to the respondents, initiative, and reliability were the least crucial abilities.

We might conclude from the findings that personal skills are necessary because they involve leadership, ethical behavior, ambiguity tolerance, critical and creative thinking, and flexibility. These competencies are crucial in determining graduates' work prospects since they positively correlate with their employability. Therefore, students must engage in non-technical skill-related activities and programs to develop their skills while studying.

As the world focuses more on AI, fresh graduates must equip themselves with IT knowledge and excellent soft skills to face workplace challenges. They must be autonomous to adapt to the ever-challenging work requirement. Failing to do so will affect fresh graduates' employability. Employers seek candidates with "soft" abilities like collaboration, communication, leadership, business acumen, and technical skills like database development, coordinate calculation, and report writing.

To sum up, soft skills are critical in enhancing relationships, supporting personal and professional development, encouraging effective collaboration and teamwork, encouraging resilience and adaptation, and driving creativity. Furthermore, these abilities are essential for overcoming obstacles and seizing opportunities in Industry 5.0's digitalized environment. Soft skills are critical to the labor market because they guarantee employability, offer a competitive edge, future-proof careers, have cross-disciplinary applications, encourage leadership and entrepreneurship, facilitate professional networking, and improve prospects for career advancement. Digital abilities combined with essential soft skills improve a person's marketability and open doors in the ever-changing job market.

In order to support graduates' employability skills, educational institutions should take a comprehensive and integrated approach to improving graduate employability. This includes stand-alone soft skills modules, student participation in extracurricular and work-related projects, work placements, and career services that guide job-getting skills, emphasizing minimizing the skills gap.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The article is the original work of the author and co-author. The article has never been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere. The work has not been submitted for publication or published in whole or in part anywhere else. We certify that each Author has contributed substantially to the work, validity, and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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