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14Assessing Employers' Perceptions Towards Internship Students

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ABSTRACT

With the opportunity to gain brief job experience in several academic subfields, internship programs are becoming increasingly significant for students from a variety of academic backgrounds. The organisations where students are placed provide them with opportunities for career exploration, self-development, and learning new skills. This study seeks to investigate the descriptive of employers' perceptions and work performance together with determining the relationships between independent variables and dependent variable among internship students. Internship students from bachelor's degree program in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Pahang Branch took part in this study. A total of 156 students in majority are females and are of Malay ethnics. They choose to undergo internship at private sector organisations mostly where monetary reward is promised. The employers' perspective towards students is high. Independent variables: work ethics are perceived as the highest value, followed by ICT competencies, communication competencies and cognitive abilities. Meanwhile, dependent variable; work performance is found to have a very high mean score. The relationship between employers' perceptions and work performance is indicated as very strong and significant. Therefore, the null hypotheses were rejected, and alternative hypotheses are accepted. This study is believed to provide a huge significance to university, industry, government and students on variety of aspects including graduate employability rate.

Keywords: *cognitive abilities, communication competencies, ICT competencies, work ethics, work performance*

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, all universities have structured and tailored programs that are designed to prepare the students before the industrial training begins. These preparations will help students in transiting smoothly from classroom environment to presenting themselves professionally in front of the potential supervisors. In University Teknologi MARA (UiTM), all Part Six students from the Bachelor of Office Systems Management (BA232) have to register for the Internship (MGT666) course. BA232 is a bachelor's degree program offered in five branches including Selangor, Malacca, Kelantan, Pahang and Sarawak. Every semester, they would spend six months (24 weeks) undergoing industrial training. This course, which is equivalent to 12 credit hours, also includes 17 MOHE learning outcomes (LO) that need to be achieved by the trainees. These are among the crucial requirements that must be considered

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while assessing the interns' work performance. Academic internships are the bridge to link the theory and practice by taking part in supervised and scheduled work. These internship programs do not only improve students' personal skills but also polish their professional growth and experience (Gault et al., 2010). Students can find companies that share the same principles as what they have learned in the university through the internship program. To put it another way, the internship program will produce workers who are qualified for jobs and meet the organisation standards. Students in internship programs receive both real-world experience and practical knowledge related to their field of study. Students must therefore comprehend the corporate world and be ready for specific practical challenges in order to meet their objectives and become "ready-to-use professionals."

According to Michaelson (2021), ethics focus more on the philosophical side, specifically on the responsibility of organisations or work environment in which the prevailing conditions preserve an individual to choose meaningful work. Additionally, work ethics facilitates employees' attitude towards hard work and their organisation (Marri et al., 2012). Employees must demonstrate a strong sense of accountability, honesty, discipline, quality, and teamwork for their job performance to be assured. Contemporary university students face the knowledge society, where mastering information and communication technologies (ICT) is an essential requirement to be part of this society (Diaz Garcia et al., 2023). Previous studies have proven that mastery of information on technology positively affects work readiness (Hakim & Kurniawati, 2022; Sihotang & Santosa, 2019). Moreover, ICT skills is also important in improving students' work readiness towards students majoring in accounting whereby there are several competency units in accounting technician positions related to ICT skills, for example operating numeric applications, managing databases, and operating an accounting information system (Hakim & Kurniawati, 2022). In the meantime, the term "cognitive ability" describes how well the human brain retains memories, extracts and processes information, and integrates logical reasoning, memory, and thought transformation. Students who enroll in internship programs are required to possess skills, such as cognitive abilities like attention, memory, logic and auditory skills which are important in predicting work performance. Thus, during the internship program, students need to be able to express themselves by contributing and sharing ideas. Furthermore, oral and written communication skills, along with leadership and professionalism and work ethic competencies, are the three main areas where students and employers most radically differ when evaluating proficiency (James & Nunamaker, 2021; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018).

For a successful, happy, and sustainable career, it is useful for individuals to be aware of themselves and the environmental factors, and make their career plans accordingly (Karakiraz et al., 2021). This would be a challenge for universities to make sure that the throughput is in line with the industry requirements. Additionally, career competencies, also known as soft skills, are vital component of a successful transition into the workforce; however, there remains a gap on how students and employers rate proficiency levels in these competencies (James & Nunamaker, 2021; Archer & Davison, 2008). This gap is the purpose of conducting the study which is to explore career competencies during an internship that have significant connections to the workforce. The research objectives are: 1. to investigate the determinants of employers' perceptions towards internship students, 2. to investigate the work performance among internship students according to the employers, and 3. to determine the relationship between employers' perception and work performance among internship students. This study focuses on work ethics, ICT competencies, cognitive skills, communication competencies and work performance among internship students from Bachelor of Office Systems and Management (BA232), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Pahang Branch.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have found that there are skills mismatch between the university and the industry requirements (Husain et al., 2020; MoHE, 2015) which affects the interns' success. The changing of industry due to the emergence of new technology (Howard, 2019) and the existence of artificial intelligence as well as ChatGPT (Cheng et al., 2024) causes more challenges for trainees. Therefore,

the assessment of work ethics, ICT competencies, cognitive abilities and work performance among internship students has been the critical focus for both the university and the industries.

Work Ethics

Work ethics have been the focus of academic institutions and employers for many years. In the Malaysian university context, it is very crucial to assess the ethics of the trainees. By having good work ethics, the interns will have a better understanding of the working class and be able to adapt and adjust well to the working environment (Abdullah et al., 2019). Work ethics include punctuality, professionalism and responsibility among interns. Hashim (2023) mentioned that in most workplaces, punctuality is regarded as professionalism. Failure to be punctual, lateness and inconsistent attendance can affect employers' perception towards their work ethics. During internships, the interns attain good work ethics when they become productive and work at a faster pace and accomplish more work, do not quit, stay highly persistence until the work which they are tasked with is completed (Abdullah et al., 2019). In a similar situation, the interns in Isa et al. (2023), are able to complete the tasks within the stipulated time and at expected quality. During internship, the supervisors and the company will observe the students, and it is important for the trainee to behave professionally and adapt with the corporate cultures. According to Richards (2023), an internship is one of university students' most common on-the-job training types and it can be one of the influential ways of teaching students on the skills and knowledge needed to work in a professional environment. The trainees should be concerned about their professional appearance such as the dress code, grooming and body odour. Since first impression is influenced by appearance, the trainees' abilities to dress appropriately and comply to grooming and personal hygiene are important.

ICT Competencies

A study by Abdullah et al. (2019) noted that interns who possess good IT skills have an added advantage to be chosen for almost every job in today's market. This is further supported by Shatri (2020) who claimed that education should embrace technology and incorporate it heavily into the learning process to keep up with the local changes in terms of knowledge and skill levels, both in terms of quantity and quality. This makes sense as in the digital era, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) competencies are essential for effective performance in various industries. This view aligns with Butarbutar (2021) who believed that the application system in the organisation can make the work more efficient and effective. According to Batcha et al. (2024), the generic skills that are needed by companies for internship students are computer and system (ICT) skills, quality of work, and creativity, and also the potential to excel in the future with least supervision. The trainees should be able to use relevant software that are needed to complete their tasks. Recently, universities increasingly incorporate ICT in their teaching and learning, thus it is important to assess how these competencies shape the trainee's performance during their internship. However, the university only exposes them with the basic ICT so it is really important for the trainee to learn the new technologies and digital platforms used in the industry quickly. They are also expected to apply their IT skills especially if there is a need to troubleshoot or solve any related ICT issues.

Communication Competencies

Previous studies have examined the importance of communication competencies for the students. Abdullah et al. (2019) highlighted that professional skills such as teamwork and communication are developed better through student experiences in project work than through traditional lectures and course work. They further explained that interns with good communication skills can convey information to others, either verbally or nonverbally, in writing or through body language and by being good listeners. Based on Isa et al. (2020), they found out that most interns in the Bachelor of business Administration in Islamic Banking, are lacking in communication skills that include verbal communication and writing in English. However, the host companies commented that employees who have good communication skills would perform better. Findings in Husain et al. (2020) also showed

that among the problems faced by the trainees is lacking in communication skills, especially in the English language. In contrast, a study among International Islamic University College Selangor (KUIS) students indicated a mean score of 4.23 for communication skills suggesting that the students performed well during their internship (Tonot & Othman, 2022). Similarly, the students in Batcha (2024) had good performance in regard to their communication skills. This demonstrates that trainees who can communicate very well, are able to express their ideas better which in return lessen the communication problems, leading to improve the organisation performance.

Cognitive Abilities

Over the years, researchers have worked to identify cognitive abilities among the students. According to Dzia-Uddin (2020), the skills emphasised most by the employers are communication skills, problem solving skills and the ability to work well in teams. Meanwhile, Ng et al. (2021) in their empirical findings, suggest that among the acquired employability skills of young graduates are communication and problem-solving. Werner et al. (2022) wrote that the prominence of soft skills in the field of events include communication skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, as well as teamwork and collaboration skills. Literatures revealed that the cognitive abilities of different trainees vary, leading them to perform differently. In a study by Karunaratne et al. (2019), the students' personal skills, which include creativity, execution of problem-solving activities are rated at average mean score. Thus, it is very crucial to understand trainees' cognitive abilities in order to assess how well interns perform in the company. Problem solving skills help the trainees to determine the root cause of the issue and find an appropriate solution. As noted by Al-Hassawi et al. (2020), a problem-solving process entails multiple strategic steps: defining the problem, assessing it, collecting relevant data, developing different solutions, evaluating alternative solutions, selecting the best answer, and generalising the results. The company expects the trainees to be able to make decisions quickly and effectively. Therefore, trainees who are excellent at problem-solving can handle work-place challenges and in return enhance their overall work performance. Additionally, many researchers have also examined creative skills among trainees during internships. Trainees with higher creative skills can adapt to the work environment better and are able to offer better solutions to the problems. Ranabahu et al. (2020) stated that internship can be used to develop innovation skills in undergraduates. Hashim (2023) mentioned that the internship experience encourages critical thinking and creativity. However, not every trainee is creative and can explore creativity during internship. Karunaratne et al. (2019) found that the respondents in their study perceived internship to not provide opportunities for them to be creative. Isa et al. (2023) found that among the attributes that are sought by the industry, in which most interns are lacking, is creativity and analytical skills.

Work Performance

The most important part of the internship is the student performance (Akashe, 2020). This also applies to BA232 trainees, who are expected to perform various administration tasks during their internship. They will be assessed on how efficiently and effectively they are able to complete the assigned tasks. However, there is a significant variation in the trainee's performance. Generally, not everyone can produce the same quality of office tasks even though they are taught the same techniques. Data issued in Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025 found that there is a mismatch in the supply and demand of graduates, with employers reporting that graduates lack the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes (MoHE, 2015). This is aligned with a recent study by Hashim (2023), in which the trainees highlighted that the tasks assigned to them are not related to what they have studied in the university. Apart from that, the trainees are also expected to have flexibility and show more positive attitudes towards their task's assignment. Trainees in Isa et al. (2020) study received positive remarks by the industry as they can meet the job requirements given. Positive impression is important since it will open more employment opportunities in the future.

Relationship Between Employers' Perceptions and Work Performance

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between work ethics and work performance. Bataineh (2020) in his study, found that work ethics have a positive significant effect on job performance. Similar findings also show Islamic work ethics positively and significantly influence employee performance of Islamic banks in Riau province (Hamzah & Basri, 2021) and another study indicated that ethics orientation positively affecting job performance (Ab Wahab, 2021). In other words, the more ethical the employees are, the lesser they practice counterproductive behavior (Word et al., 2022). Work ethics, however, may not necessarily translate into excellent performance. As proven in Laguador et al. (2020), they discovered that work ethics have significant negative correlation to the internship performance. In addition, Ariffin and Murniyati (2020) found that there is no correlation between work ethics and work performance. These findings suggest that other influential factors may have greater impact on a trainee's performance. There are not many studies that have looked at the relationship between ICT competencies and job performance among trainees. However, few authors have linked ICT to better work performance among employees (Oyedipe et al., 2019; Bahasuwa, 2020; Sina, 2022), while Gharti (2023) found a strong and positive relationship between the two variables. Other studies demonstrate that ICT competencies enhance correctness (Okolocha & Ezike, 2018), efficiency (Lim et al., 2020) and help the employees to achieve their goals (Avila et al., 2021) which also leads to better performance. On the contrary, Usai et al. (2021) and Heredia et al. (2022) in their research found that digital capabilities have little or no effect on firm performance. The impact of new technologies demands intercultural communication skills between employees and employers with the new global nature of organising. Khan (2019) stated in his study that competency is a combination of implicit, clear, collective and discrete knowledge, ability, and skills that lead to an efficient, effective, and exceptional performance. Communication is expected to be able to strengthen employee competencies to improve performance (Hadiyanto et al., 2022). This skill may help groups to make more innovative decisions (Wibowo, 2017), become the zenith of job performance and nurturing harmonious working relationships within the organisational milieu (Hee et al., 2019). Salman et al. (2020) revealed that self-competence, team competence, communicative competence and social competence are the most important competencies required by employees in determining their overall performance. The relationship between general cognitive ability (GCA) and overall job performance has been a long-accepted fact in industrial and organisational psychology (Sackett et al., 2024). Recent findings also supported the claim that more specific factors of intelligence contribute to the prediction of job performance (Kato et al., 2023). In their study which investigate the relationship between ability tilt (a measure representing differential strength between two specific abilities) and job performance was hypothesised that ability tilt would differentially relate to job performance based on whether or not the tilt matched the ability requirements of the job, and that ability tilt would provide incremental validity over *g* (intelligence) and specific abilities for predicting performance when the tilt matched job requirements (Kato et al., 2023). Even though jobs vary considerably in terms of the specific cognitive abilities they require, but cognitive ability is necessary for all jobs (Kato et al, 2023; Fleishman et al., 1999). Khalid & Traynor (2021) indicated that associations between cognitive abilities and job performance are generally significant, although the pattern differs across occupations. The conceptual framework design for determining relationships is displayed in Figure 1.

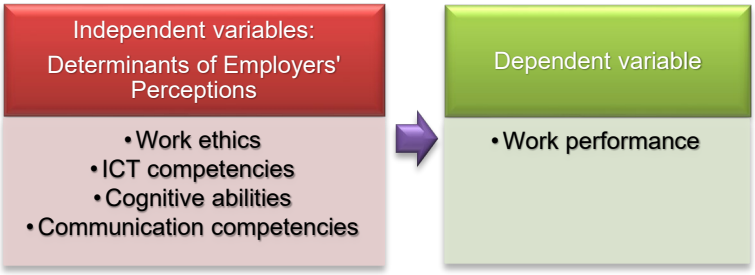

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

A total of 156 students who underwent internship training (from 29 August 2022 to 10 February 2023) were the population and sampling frame. Since every member of the population was selected, thus, neither sampling technique nor sample size determined. These students were evaluated individually by their internship supervisors (employers) via online survey containing rubrics of Internship subject (MGT666) designed by the Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Branch. In the online survey, information of demographic profile is required such as gender, race and organisations' sectors. Next is the section containing rubrics (adapted from MGT666) that list 20 attributes on 7-point likert-scale namely; 7=excellent, 6=very good, 5=good, 4=average, 3=needs improvement, 2=poor, 1=very poor. This category of likert-scale obeys the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) requirement. Some researchers prefer different scales with 7 items or with an even number of response items (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000), but Symonds (1924) in Croasmun & Ostrom (2011) noted that a 7-point scale offers optimal reliability. The result of reliability test in Table 2 exhibits high value of the reliability of the data**.** The collected data is analysed using SPSS version 28 tool that provides accurate data analysis and actionable findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistics	Dof	Sig.	Statistics	DoF	Sig.
Employers' Perceptions	.135	156	<.001	.866	156	<.001

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

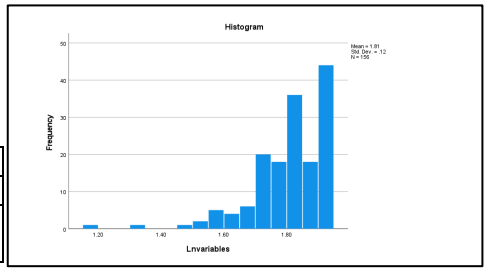

Figure 2: Histogram of Normality

Since the significance level (*p*-value) is less than 0.05, therefore normal distribution was not assumed. The data was recorded yet was not normally distributed.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.97	20

Table 3: Demographic Profile

Demographic		N	%
Gender of Students	Male	18	11.5
	Female	138	88.5
Students' Race	Malay	155	99.4
	Aboriginal	1	0.6
Organization Sector	Government	50	32.1
	Semi-government	27	17.3
	Private	79	50.6

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010) as cited in Hee (2014), the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.6 is considered poor, 0.7 is acceptable and 0.8 is categorised as good. Since the value of Cronbach's Alpha of this study is .97, it falls under excellent strength of association. A reliability coefficient of .97 indicates that 97% of variability in employers' feedback is due to true score differences among employers, while the remaining 13% is due to measurement errors. Table 3 shows the demographic profile of respondents. The gender of respondents who are students undergoing industrial training is female in majority (N = 138, 88.5%) while the remaining is male (N = 18, 11.5%). Most of the students are Malay (N = 155, 99.4%) and an aboriginal student (N = 1, 0.6%). 79 employers' organisations are from the private sector (50.6%), 50 government organisations (32.1%), and 27 semi-government organisations (17.3%) participated in this study.

Research Objective 1: Investigating the Determinants of Employers' Perceptions Towards Internship Students

Scale	Scale Weighted Mean Interval	Mean Descriptive
7	6.23 - 7.00	Very High
6	5.35 - 6.21	High
5	4.48 - 5.34	Above Average
4	3.61 - 4.47	Average
3	2.74 - 3.60	Below Average
2	1.87 - 2.73	Low
1	1.00 - 1.86	Very Low

Figure 3: Mean Descriptive Interpretations (Muhammad et al., 2018)

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Employers' Perspective

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Employers' Perspective	156	3.37	7.00	6.15	.69

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of All Independent Variables

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Work Ethics	156	3.20	7.00	6.40	.64
ICT Competencies	156	3.00	7.00	6.18	.81
Communication Competencies	156	3.33	7.00	6.01	.79
Cognitive Abilities	156	3.00	7.00	5.93	.83

Figure 3 describes interpretations of mean descriptive score. Table 4 shows the level of employers' perspective based on the feedback collected and analysed through this study. Apparently, the level of employers' perspective is high (M = 6.15, SD = .69). Table 5 shows descriptive value of all variables. Work ethics is found very high (M=6.40, SD=.64) followed by ICT competencies (M=6.18, SD=.81), communication competencies (M=6.01, SD=.79) and cognitive abilities (M5.93, SD=.83) with high mean scores. Among all the variables, work ethics has the highest mean value while cognitive abilities is found to have the lowest value.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of All Items of Employers' Perception

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Work Ethics					
Work ethics (honesty and trustworthy)	156	4	7	6.60	.65
Professional appearance (dress code, grooming, body odor, etc.)	156	3	7	6.53	.76
Demonstrate punctuality	156	3	7	6.51	.72
Professionalism	156	3	7	6.28	.82
Understands and applies standard procedures / general plans and goals of department	156	3	7	6.08	.88
ICT Competencies					
Computer and system (ICT) application skills	156	3	7	6.19	.81
Ability to use software in writing a report	156	3	7	6.17	.89
Communication Competencies					
Communication and language proficiency skills	156	3	7	6.09	.86
Ability to convey ideas both in written and oral forms	156	3	7	6.00	.87
Business interaction and interrelation skills	156	3	7	5.93	.92
Cognitive Abilities					
a) Problem solving skills					
Identify problems and its urgency	156	3	7	5.98	.94
Analyzes problems and suggest possible solutions	156	3	7	5.85	.91
b) Creative thinking skills					
Knowledge application and creative thinking abilities	156	3	7	5.97	.84
Ability to recommend creative, innovative, and practical solutions	156	3	7	5.91	.89

Table 6 describes all items on employers' perception towards work ethics practiced by internship students. This study found that work ethics (honesty and trustworthy) (M=6.60, SD=.65), professional appearance (dress code, grooming, body odor, etc.) (M=6.53, SD=.76), and demonstrate punctuality (M=6.51, SD=.72) are the strong factors contributing to the higher value of work ethics among internship students. In addition, professionalism (M=6.28, SD=.82) and ability to understand and apply standard procedures/general plans and goals of department (M=6.08, SD=.88) are also highly perceived by employers. To build strong work ethics, the internship students should be aware that honesty and trustworthy are the vital qualities in professional settings. The employers' perception towards ICT competencies among internship students shows that computer and system (ICT) application skills (M=6.19, SD=.81) and the ability to use software in writing a report (M=6.17, SD=.89) are among the ICT competencies required among internship students. Next, the table also describes the employers' perception towards communication competencies among internship students. The internship students' communication competencies are the result of communication and language proficiency skills (M=6.09, SD=.86), ability to convey ideas both in written and oral forms (M=6.00, SD=.87), and business interaction and interrelation skills (M=5.93, SD=.92). Other than that, the employers' perception towards internship students also relies on cognitive ability. Cognitive ability is derived from problem solving and creative thinking skills. The ability to identify problems and its urgency (M=5.98, SD=.94), analyzes problems and suggest possible solutions (M=5.85, SD=.91) forms the internship students' problem-solving skills. On the other hand, knowledge on application and creative thinking abilities (M=5.97, SD=.84) and ability to recommend creative, innovative, and practical solutions (M=5.91, SD=.89) are found to build their creative thinking skills.

Research objective 2: To determine the work performance among internship students according to employers

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variable

Dep. variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Work Performance	156	3.33	7.00	6.23	.70

Table 7 shows the level of internship students' work performance based on feedback collected and is analysed through this study. Outwardly, their work performance is perceived by employers as high (M = 6.23, SD = .70).

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics of Work Performance

Work Performance	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Willingness to work beyond the job description.	156	4	7	6.39	.72
Responds promptly to task requirements.	156	3	7	6.37	.76
Flexibility towards task assignments.	156	3	7	6.29	.78
Ability to produce work, which is complete and accurate in accordance with job requirements.	156	3	7	6.21	.85
Applies knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish task.	156	3	7	6.12	.79
Ability to supervise related practices and processes concerning his/her field of specialization.	156	3	7	5.95	.85

Table 8 describes the constructs of employers' perception towards work performed by internship students. Willingness to work beyond the job description (M=6.39, SD=.72), responds promptly to task requirements (M=6.37, SD=.76), and flexibility towards task assignments (M=6.29, SD=.78) are the work performance expected by employers. The ability to produce work, which is complete and accurate in accordance with job requirements (M=6.21, SD=.85), applies knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish task (M=6.12, SD=.79), and ability to supervise related practices and processes concerning his/her field of specialisation (M=5.95, SD=.85) are also the skills that undergraduate employees are able to perform.

Research Objective 3: To determine the relationship between employers' perception and work performance among internship students.

Hypotheses:

H_0 Work ethics has no relationship with work performance

H_A Work ethics has a relationship with work performance

H_0 Communication competencies do not influence work performance

H_A Communication competencies influence work performance

H_0 Cognitive abilities do not influence work performance

H_A Cognitive abilities influence work performance

H_0 IT competencies have no relationship with work performance

H_A IT competencies have a relationship with work performance

Spearman ρ	Correlation
≥0.70	Very strong relationship
0.40-0.69	Strong relationship
0.30-0.39	Moderate relationship
0.20-0.29	Weak relationship
0.01-0.19	No or negligible relationship

This descriptor applies to both positive and negative relationships.
(Adapted From Dancey and Reidy, 2004)[40]

Figure 4: Correlation Interpretations Table

Table 9: Correlations Between Employers' Perceptions and Work Performance

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Work ethics	-			
2. ICT competencies	.653**	-		
3. Cognitive ability	.761**	.711**	-	
4. Communication competencies	.766**	.788**	.835**	-
5. Work performance	.852**	.786**	.849**	.864**

Figure 4 shows correlation interpretations that is used to describe the findings. Table 9 shows the relationship between employers' perceptions determinants, namely; work ethics, ICT competencies, cognitive abilities, and communication competencies and work performance. The data is analysed using Spearman's rho when the data fail to meet the assumptions of Person's r. Results of the correlations indicate that higher work ethics scores are associated with higher work performance scores ($r=.786$, $p < .001$). Thus, the first determinant; work ethics has a very strong and significant relationship with work performance. The second determinant, ICT competencies have similar significant and very strong relationship with work performance. According to the analysis, it indicates that higher ICT competencies scores are associated with higher work performance scores ($r=.786$, $p < .001$). The third determinant; cognitive abilities also have a significant and strong relationship with work performance. Cognitive abilities are the lowest mean among all variables of employers' perceptions, yet it has a positive relationship with work performance. The investigation indicates that higher cognitive abilities scores are associated with higher work performance scores ($r=.849$, $p < .001$). Lastly, the finding indicates that higher communication competencies scores are associated with higher work performance scores ($r=.864$, $p < .001$). Thus, the fourth determinant; communication competencies have a significant and strong relationship with work performance. It is also hypothesised that a positive relationship would exist between the four independent variables and dependent variable. Therefore, all null hypotheses are rejected, and alternative hypotheses are accepted.

CONCLUSION

Despite not being normally distributed, the data of this study has been transformed. Nonetheless, a high result was obtained from the reliability test. The majority of internship participants were female and belonged to the Malay ethnic group with the exception of one Aboriginal student. Compared to government and semi-government organizations, a large number of students were chosen to complete internships in private companies. They were given allowances and other intangible benefits as a reward of working in private companies. An allowance is a significant form of compensation and recognition

for the work and effort put in by the interns and to cover their basic needs and expenses such as food, transport, and accommodation (upscale.my, 2023).

BA232 internship students had excelled in their work performance. They were trustworthy and honest, had professional demeanor, were on time, demonstrated professionalism, understood and followed organizational policies and procedures as well as their wide goals and plans. Internship students from BA232 program showed different results compared to a study conducted by Diaz Garcia et al. (2023) among students in University of Valencia (Spain). The technological competence of University of Valencia students was at the level of normal users, capable of handling computers and basic IT applications. Their use of ICT for academic tasks and training activities was generally moderate. Meanwhile, BA232 students showed higher ICT competencies throughout their internship period. They are capable of applying computer and IT skills and use the appropriate software for writing tasks. Problem solving and creative thinking skills among BA232 internship students were at average level. They were moderate at identifying problems, analysing problems and recommending potential solutions. Meanwhile, Koro-Ljungberg et al. (2017), found that internship students failed to understand the complexities and ambiguities of workplace problems. Thus, trainees with lesser problem-solving skills typically struggle to complete their work tasks. On the contrary, a study by Karunaratne et al. (2019), revealed that 63% of the trainees in Sri Lanka agreed that they were able to execute problem solving activities during internship. Work performance of internship students of BA232 program showed that the students demonstrated high work performance by exhibiting a high level of willingness to work, responsiveness to task, flexibility, quality of work and the ability to apply necessary knowledge and skills into task but they need to improve on the ability to supervise related practices and processes concerning their field of specialization because it is one of the elements in leadership skills, which is sought upon by companies but is lacking in many university graduates. World Bank Enterprise (World Bank, 2015a), reported that almost 1000 companies showed that management and leadership skills (82.5%), followed by technical, vocational and job-specific skill (78.5%), foreign language skills (73.5%), and lastly interpersonal and communication skills (69.9%) were difficult to find. In addition, this study discovered that work ethics has a very strong relationship to work performance. Honesty, trustworthiness, appearance, punctuality, professionalism and application of standard procedures are the traits that must be possessed by the intern students. This discovery matches with studies by Bataineh (2020), Hamzah & Basri (2021), and Ab Wahab (2021). ICT competencies also have connection with work performance, where the students showed high ICT competencies throughout their internship period.

Furthermore, communication competencies had a very strong relationship with work performance compared to other determinants. It shows that the student has better communication and language proficiency as well as the ability to convey ideas. Through internship, students are able to develop communication skills and problem-based solving abilities plus increasing the probability of being employed with higher salary (Urqua-Grande & Perez Estabanez. 2020). Cognitive abilities also influence the work performance of the student. The intern students were found to show the skills at the average level during internship and it needs room for improvement. It is in line with what has been found by Isa et al. (2020) which skills that interns are lacking is creativity and analytical skill. One of the limitations of this study may viewed from participants bias including race and gender biases because majority of the respondents were Malay and female. In addition, they were students from one branch of campus. Limited scope of study that only focuses to four constructs (variables) used for data collection might not be worth for current study since it has a clearly and narrowly defined objectives.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study show that employers perceive interns most favourably in terms of their work ethics, followed by work performance, ICT competencies, communication competencies, and finally, cognitive ability. All these competencies among interns have room for improvement that require commitment from all related parties which are the students, university and employers themselves.

University might revise their curriculum to best fit the need of the industry as some theories or knowledge might be outdated or not in line with the need of the industry. Besides, university may add more activities in their program or getting the students to involve with program or community program that require critical thinking, creativity and communication which will help them to practice and polish their knowledge and skills before going for internship. This research only focuses on the perception of employers towards interns' students in their company. It is solely focusing on how the employers view their interns and highlighting the area that needs to be improved. Future research might be done to see whether the perception of the students and the employers are in line with one another. Both parties may have views that could contribute to improving the current issues regarding the competencies of intern students.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Asmui, M. planned the research objectives and methodology and contributed to the interpretation of the results. Solat, N. and Sulaimin, S. A. carried out the introduction and literature review. Md. Juperi, N. Z. carried out the conclusions and recommendations. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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