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A SURVEY ON STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE ON EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on students' knowledge on employability skills. A total of 24 diploma students involved in this exploratory study and they answered a set of questionnaires with five questions distributed to them. Convenient sampling was used in the survey. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse data gathered from the survey. The findings show that respondents knew the skills they needed to advance and thrive in the workplace. Among important skills needed are good communication skills, decision making and problem-solving skills, IT skills, multi-tasking skills, critical thinking skills and professionalism in performing work. To educate these students for their future careers, classroom activities and lessons must specifically address workplace skills. The study's results are also consistent with Yorke and Knight's employability theory, which holds that graduates are more likely to land a job and succeed in their chosen fields if they have a list of accomplishments that encompass knowledge, abilities, and personal qualities. Therefore, by placing a strong emphasis on helping students to develop their metacognitive abilities, and

Keywords:

Employability skills, job skills,
marketability, youth
unemployment, interpersonal
skills

increase their self-esteem, universities can prepare students to become more employable.

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1. Introduction

Youth unemployment in Malaysia is increasingly becoming a concerning issue among young graduates. Young people are considered national assets as they are responsible for the economic future of Malaysia. Based on the data by the International Labour Organisation (2020), Malaysia's employment rate has been stable in the twenty-first century. It was only in 2018 that the unemployment rate skyrocketed to 3.3 percent. Shockingly however, it turned out that half of the unemployed society were young people under the age of twenty-five. Since the establishment of Unit Pengambilan Universiti (UPU), the youth are given the opportunity to further their studies to tertiary education equally through online applications. It gives them access to a number of public universities across Malaysia with many different programmes available from diploma to degree level. Therefore, most young people in Malaysia are not deprived of good education despite youth unemployment running rampant in the country. Fung and Nga (2023) claim that there is a mismatch between the knowledge gained in formal education versus the skills needed for employment in the labour market. Educational institutions and firms are responsible for combating youth unemployment by providing apprenticeship, training and internships, aside from the textbook education the students receive from their studies to polish these skills.

1.1 What are employability skills?

One main factor that still lacks the awareness of its importance by students and graduates is a set of employability skills. Over the course of decades, employability skills have been extensively defined by different researchers. It can however be concluded that employability skills are essential across jobs in all fields and areas. No matter what programme an employee is from, employability skills remain very important in the job market. Mohamad Zuber et al. (2020) defined employability skills as the job readiness of students to be competent and competitive employees in the workforce. They specified that employability skills range from leadership, critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, self-management, planning and organising, technological as well as initiation and enterprise. In other words, they can also be defined as soft skills in three crucial areas, life skills, work skills and technical skills that employees can develop personally and professionally. These skills can also be rooted in their character. While employability skills may be understood as the requirement for unique graduates to get hired in various industries, it also extends to the ability for them to excel in the increasingly competitive job market. Therefore, employability skills are necessary to enter and stay in the workforce.

1.2 Why are these skills important?

Tyson (2020) identified two key areas that make up employability skills based on the previous researchers and interviews with high-tech employers who were being asked for the desired skills in landing and maintaining a job. The first one refers to personal skills, which is an individual approach towards work and learning in both work and educational context. Personal

skills include soft skills that can be arduous to cultivate in their studies. Instead, it serves to be an individual's characteristics and positive personal qualities that make employees perform in the job sector. Therefore, the desired personal skills are influenced by numerous factors other than the classroom environment, such as parental upbringing and social circumstances. While personal skills allow employees to excel individually, Tyson (2020) also highlights interpersonal skills are essential in building and developing relationships within the workplace. Yarnall and Remold (2019) claim that employers are wary of workers who are constantly arguing and not possessing the necessary qualities as members in a team. Although each employee is an individual, he needs to see himself fits in a society as business itself is a huge part of the economic community. Interpersonal skills, or people skills are range from working in teams, treating customers right, respecting hierarchies, and building group cohesion.

Although employability skills can be defined differently in various contexts, the required skill sets can be categorised either as personal or interpersonal skills, with instances of these two overlapping occasionally. Employability skills are often confused with job skills. They are widely known as workplace skills. These two concepts appear to be similar, yet very different to one another. However, both contribute to the performance of an employee in the job market. Job skills are specific to the tasks themselves, allowing an employee to be efficient within a particular job or profession. Job skills exist within the job itself and mostly, it often does not exclude an employee's personal characteristics outside of his attitude in performing at work. Job skills can be technical, including the competencies of an employee after he has acquired specific jobs like operating machines, coding programs, performing clinical procedures and others. Job skills are mostly acquired through formal training, whether from an employee's education or on-the-job training. On the other hand, employability skills refer to an employee's approach rather than just work tasks. This is why employees with good employability skills can survive anywhere regardless of whether they are experts or not. By having positive personal and interpersonal skills, these employees excel as individuals and team members. As a matter of fact, it is difficult for employers to find workers with desired employability skills. Employability skills not only affect the specific job tasks, but also the effectiveness of a workplace.

Objectives

The survey aims to explore students' knowledge on employability skills and to identify employability skills employers seek for in graduates.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employability skills

Rapid technological change, digitization, and globalization are changing the structure of today's workplace. In the process, new jobs are created which meant that workers are required to continuously reskill and upskill to stay relevant and retain their employability (Deloitte, 2020). Moreover, massification of HEIs means that more and more graduates are competing for fewer jobs (Chua, 2023). Therefore, to be competitive, graduates need to develop additional employability or soft skills to be noticeable and to navigate inevitable challenges in their chosen professions (Scott & Willison, 2021). According to Romgens et al (2019), employability refers to a specific set of achievement, skills, understanding and personal attributes that will enable an individual to secure a job, retain employment and stay relevant as well as successful in his or her chosen occupation. Li and Sun (2019) pointed that employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realize potential through sustainable employment. Koenelakis and Petrakaki (2020) believed that employability is a collection of achievements: skills, understandings, and personal characteristics that makes graduates more likely to secure

employment and succeed in their chosen career and hence, benefit themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy. According to Majid et al (2020), graduates employability includes their capacity to find work in the labour market, their ability to engage in and contribute to the economy by using what they learned in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their ability to improve their social status and economy of their nation. Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2015–2025 emphasizes the need for graduates to possess the necessary knowledge and technical expertise and to make ethical decisions and adapt to rapid change of job market (Anicic & Divjak, 2020). Therefore, in order to develop the economy of the country, HEIs play an important role to develop the potential human resources to fulfil various employment demands in the labour market. As today's job environment is competitive, employers are seeking for competent and well-rounded employees who have employability skills such as leadership; teamwork; critical thinking; initiative and enterprise; planning and organizing; self-management; long-life learning; inter-personal skills; and technology skills (Fogleman, 2019). Furthermore, researchers discovered that graduates with soft skills such as positive attitude, effective communication, problem solving, time management, self-confidence, handling criticism and flexibility will persevere better in the competitive world compared to those who are lacking in soft skills (Vanitha & Jaganathan, 2019; Vyas, 2019; Al Asefer et al, 2021). As such, HEIs need to expose the students to the real work environment and provide access for them to enhance their personal experiences.

2.2 The effects of not having good employability skills

Unemployment among graduates has been linked to their low level of competency, lack of necessary qualities and skills, mismatch of qualifications, and inability to perform (Chaka, 2020). Employers have continuously provided feedback that the graduates lack of employability skills: English language proficiency, communication skills, analytical skills, and critical thinking skills. The lack of these skills has a negative impact on company outcomes such as employee behaviour, safety, engagement, and productivity (Hussin et al, 2023). As a result, graduates are unable to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after commencing employment. The lack of development in the acquisition of soft skills contributes to the gap in graduate employability (Meclachlan, 2019). Employers seek applicants with capabilities and skills appropriate for the work environment to help facilitate and enhance the organization's productivity (Labzina, Dobrova, Menshenina, & Ageenko, 2019). One strategy to enhance graduates' employability to cater with the industry demand is to focus on work-life competency and the key skills needed for the advancement of the organization (Periera et al, 2022). This is a challenge that demands transformation at the HEIs level, taking into consideration the perspectives and momentum of the various interest groups concerned (Anicic & Divjak, 2020). Cotronei-Baird (2019) also argued that the issue of employability skills development is crucial for national and international HEIs as well as the importance of investigating the challenges experienced by administrators, academic staffs and other stakeholders. According to the Ministry of Education Higher Education (2019), a significant number of graduates from across different HEIs was unemployed upon graduation. Several factors have been linked to this graduate's unemployment. Among them are mismatch of qualifications to market needs or overqualified graduates, lack of interpersonal and social skills, lack of career guidance and information, and economic factors (Majid et al, 2019). It is therefore vital to address the enhancement of graduate's competency to ensure that graduate employment matches market needs in the future. Hence, HEIs need to find solutions to improve graduate competency that can meet the industry demand.

Previous studies indicated that unemployment can be reduced with strategic planning undertaken by the HEIs, such as ensuring the programmes and courses offered is in line with the job market and transforming the administrative view within the institutions (Behle, 2020; Fogleman, 2019; Chaka, 2020). This triggers HEIs to produce employable graduates who can create and develop new ideas,

but at the same time can utilize their knowledge to provide better services in the advancement of new technological and global economic areas (Ma'dan, Imail, & Daud, 2020). Employability skills in HEIs can be developed through a variety of student learning opportunities and activities which are part of the HEIs experience – self-study, participation in lectures, attending specialized career-advising workshops or participating in work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes (Gerhardt, 2019). Admittedly, WIL can greatly assist and nurture students' employability skills due to its experiential and practice-based learning models (e.g., service learning, cooperative education, work-based learning) and activities (e.g., internships, fieldwork, volunteering, project-based work, simulations, clinical placements, practicums) (Sun, 2019). On the other hand, Cheng, Adekola, Albia and Cai (2021) pointed out that traditional small-group teaching activities can go a long way towards bridging the gap between graduates' skills and labour market needs. They outlined the benefits for the development of employability skills of specific pedagogic workplace techniques: presentation, problem-solving, case studies, Oxford Union debate, and role-play. Aligned to this, to nurture, enhance and secure graduates' employability attributes, experiences and competency level, the university can focus on teaching and learning development which include updating and modifying teaching and learning methods, restructuring programme and course offerings, fostering collaborations with industry and increasing student's curriculum and added-value activities (Meclachlan, 2019). On the other hand, the industry or employers should increase work-related opportunities for graduates by offering placements and internships towards improving their employability skills and providing them with real-time opportunities so that they can perform effectively in workplace situations (Ornellas et al, 2019 & Penratanahiran & Thongkham, 2021). At institutional level, the contribution of career services in coordination with faculties and departments will increase and play an important role to help HEIs focusing their effort on enhancing graduates' employability. Developing graduate employability is a complex undertaking, so it requires multiple approaches and inputs from various stakeholders (i.e., students, employers, governments, employer associations, and alumni).

3. Methodology

A total of 24 diploma students in a public university participated in the survey. Convenient sampling was used in the survey. In an exploratory study where the sample is from 10-30, small samples are common and acceptable as the goal of the survey is to test feasibility or generate hypotheses; not to generalize (Hertzog, 2008). This study used a sample of 24 respondents due to limited access to participants and resource constraints. While the sample size restricts the statistical power and generalizability of the findings, it allows for initial exploration of trends and relationships relevant to the research questions." Furthermore, the sample size is homogenous. If the target population is highly homogeneous, fewer respondents may be needed to accurately reflect the group's perspectives or behaviors. A homogeneous group reduces variability, meaning fewer data points may still capture the central tendencies effectively. Parker (2002) notes that when the sample population is relatively homogeneous, fewer respondents may be needed to achieve the desired accuracy.

A set of questionnaire comprises of 5 open-ended questions was distributed to the respondents. The questionnaires were distributed in a normal teaching and learning session in class. A simple descriptive statistic was used to analyze the data collected.

4. Findings and discussion

The following summarizes the results gathered from question number one on the knowledge on what employability skills are.

Table 1
Knowledge on employability skills

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	
Skills employees need to have to be accepted by the company	1.	2
Ability to get a job	2.	1
Some criteria to show skills in job	3.	2
Good attitudes to be liked by people	4.	1
What employers need in employees	5.	2
Skills needed to be hired	6.	2
Skills needed to make the company successful	7.	2
Social skills, work skills and professional skills	8.	1
Able to communicate and be intelligent	9.	1
Someone's ability in job scope	10.	1
Social skills and computing skills	11.	1
Being multi tasking and able to solve problems	12.	1
Critical thinking skills	13.	1
Able to adapt to situations/working life	14.	2
Cooperation skills	15.	1
**Did not answer the question	16.	2
**Answered with "I don't know"	17.	1

From the table, it can be concluded that 87.5 % of the respondents are aware of what employability skills are. They are aware that employability skills are skills needed to adapt and perform well in the workplace. Employability skills mentioned by the respondents include skills of having good communication skills, decision making and problem-solving skills, IT skills, multi-tasking skills, professionalism in performing work and critical in thinking skills. These findings are in line with research findings from Singh (2022), Daniel, Alamil & Mainga (2022), Alharahsheh, Pius, Guenane , Mazumdar & Chad (2022) and Latisha & Surina (2010).

Question number 2 is on the criteria that employers seek from their employees. The respondents had to list five most important skills employers seek in employees. Based on the results gathered, it shows that respondents are aware of what employer's need from employees. Skills like knowing more than two languages, being punctual, having good communication and problem solving skills, being pro-active and creative, having good work ethics, being responsible, having good leadership skills, being able to think critically, being loyal to the organization, having good team work skills, having positive mind set, being passionate and professional about work and having good technical and IT skills were among the skills listed by the respondents. Al Asefer and Zainal Abidin (2021) claimed that it matters what employers think about soft skills. Students must acquire and develop soft skills throughout their lives to succeed academically and to have traits that increase their employability in the future. Soft skills are the human skills required in the workplace which were mentioned by the respondents in this survey.

For question 3, the respondents had to rank from number 1 (not important) to 5 (very important) on skills that they possess. Findings show communication ranked as the highest skills possessed by the respondents, followed by teamwork skills, technical skills, and leadership skills.

Effective communication can inspire workers to make constructive contributions that will enhance their workplace. Communication is essential to the fundamental operations of every organization. Information on an organization's goals, policies, and procedures, tasks and responsibilities, and other internal operations are sent to the audience through communication. Despite its apparent simplicity, research has demonstrated that communication has the power to either strengthen or weaken an organization (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Their study involved 138 respondents at three human resource consultancy companies in Lusaka Zambia. Their data were collected through both primary and secondary sources. The distribution of questionnaires served as one of the primary sources of data. Relevant information from textbooks, articles, and journals on communication, systems theory, and performance served as the secondary source of data. Based on their study, it was found that effective communication and the channel of communication are positively correlated. Additionally, the study did validate that good communication improves organizational effectiveness. Nevertheless, there was no connection between the administration and the communication medium. The results of the questionnaire also showed that the largest obstacle to efficient communication is management's disparate communication styles. Thus, the result of the study is in line with Musheke and Phiri (2021) as the respondent's viewed communication is very important in the workplace.

In addition, teamwork skills need to be integrated in the university syllabi because these skills are considered essential for personal, academic and professional achievement. De Prada, Mareque and Pino-Juste (2022) interpret teamwork as: Members must have (a) similar interests, (b) be interdependent to create synergy, and (c) be large enough—at least two members are considered sufficient. In other words, teamwork is viewed as a group of individuals who work together to achieve a common goal. The finding from question number three for the current survey shows the respondents ranked having good teamwork as the second factor to succeed in the workplace. It can be implied that the respondents are aware the importance of having good communication skills that help in teamwork skills. These two skills are interrelated as one needs to communicate to ensure work can be effectively done in a group so that the goal of the company can be achieved.

Besides, leadership skills refer to the qualities and habits that leaders should possess to improve the well-being of their workforce and advance their businesses. Helping people develop their own strengths is a key component of great leadership capabilities. When leaders help others develop their own capabilities, they succeed in applying their leadership abilities. One should be able to differentiate between a leader and a manager. According to Institute of Directors (2024), managerial and leadership responsibilities are related. Though they are different, both are necessary. Leaders can function at any level of an organization. However, a manager's authority is determined by his or her professional role, whereas a leader's authority is dependent on his or her personal attributes. Although both managers and leaders strive to accomplish organizational goals, managers concentrate on the process of goal achievement through the organization's actions and behaviours in the workplace, whereas leaders develop the vision, inspiration, and drive to accomplish them. As leadership skills can be learnt (Kapur, 2020), university students should be exposed to events either inside or outside the university campus to enhance their leadership skills.

Question number 4 is on the importance of networking in improving employability. 58.3% claimed that it is very important, 25% moderately important and 16.7% extremely important. Reasons given for their choices of answers are to have more connection, to have more contact, improve communication skills, widen thinking skills, improve social skills, build professional relationships, can complete task easily, easy to ask help, easy to collaborate. The ability to create a solid and meaningful relationship is crucial for success in both one's personal and professional life. The goal of networking is to create, preserve, and fortify genuine connections that allow people to access

resources, information, and assistance that can help them advance both personally and professionally. It is a procedure necessary at every level of an individual's career path. Since employees are constantly changing occupations, networking is seen as a crucial skill for those seeking boundaryless careers. From the survey findings, it shows that majority of the respondents are aware on the importance of having good networking in the workplace. "Networking is critical to play the leadership role. Top managers or business leaders must be good at strategic networking; it occurs both within and outside the organization. That is, inside and outside links are needed to be a successful leader," (Akkas, 2023, p. 20).

Question number 5 is on skills or qualities that the respondents believe that make someone highly employable. Being multilingual, having good communication skills, being disciplined, willing to learn new things, having good technical and IT skills, being trustworthy, having good leadership skills, hardworking and being able to work independently or with minimum supervision are among the skills the respondents believe in making someone employed.

Being multilingual at work has many advantages, one of which is the significant in employment prospects. According to research, multilingual people's capacity to cross cultural barriers and promote communication in multicultural settings can increase their employment chances by up to 35% (St. Augustine College, 2024). Besides, nowadays one of the most sought-after abilities by employers is communication. Effective communication skills enable you to effectively communicate concepts, directions, and facts, develop a good rapport with co-workers, supervisors, and clients, work together effectively on projects, find effective solutions to issues, persuade, influence, and bargain with others, deliver first-rate client service and boost your career by promoting yourself (Garganta, 2024). Having good communication skills in the workplace allows smooth communication that leads to improved performance among employees. Improved performance is the result of being disciplined. According to Bhavani (2020), "Discipline is the most important for healthy atmosphere, sustainable growth of industry, and for achievement of organizational goals." (p.1) Thus, to retain discipline, the organization should take the appropriate actions. All employees in the organization should be informed by the rules that are formulated. Employees that disregard the guidelines must be observed, contacted for counselling, and made aware of their mistakes. He will still receive punishment if he does not rectify his mistakes. Good discipline is maintained through appropriate rules and communication.

In addition, willingness to learn is also important to ensure employees are equipped with the latest knowledge especially on technology that rapidly changes over time. During the employment process, companies evaluate a candidate's aptitude for learning new talents in addition to his or her existing skill set. A willingness to learn shows that an employee has the growth potential that is a necessary attribute. According to a Harris Poll survey conducted in 2021, 81% of firms rank this crucial soft skill as their top concern (Schooley, 2024). Job applicants need to show that they are flexible and eager to take more responsibilities, because CEOs place a high value on employees' readiness to grow with the firm and acquire new abilities.

Technological skills are also important skills in the workplace. Ernst, Merola and Samaan (2019) ranked social and emotional abilities as the second most sought-after skill set for the future, after technological skills. Other abilities that are under the social skill category include creativity, teamwork, collaboration, curiosity, empathy, conflict resolution, innovation, and emotional intelligence (EI). Furthermore, according to Brackett (2019), motivation, job performance, organizational commitment, creativity, and innovation are all correlated with emotional intelligence. Employees that possess emotional intelligence will be able to comprehend and control both their own and others' emotions at work (Brackett, 2019). As virtual world collaboration

grows, it will become more and more crucial to master this ability. In their study, Rios, Ling, Pugh and Becker (2020) claim that the four most in-demand 21st century skills found across roughly 142,000 job advertisements were oral and written communication, collaboration, and problem solving.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that respondents were aware of the skills they need to survive and advance in the workplace. Thus, classroom activities and lessons need to cater for the students' workplace skills as to prepare them for their future job.

5. Conclusion

The survey tried to explore learners' knowledge on employability skills and their perceptions on them. The findings show that learners are aware of what are required by employers. Future employers prefer graduates with skills like being pro-active, who can work with minimum supervision, who have good IT and problem-solving skills and who can communicate well. Graduates themselves need to improve their soft skills over time to survive the challenging workplace later.

The results of the survey may lead us to believe that personal qualities are essential since they include adaptability, leadership, moral conduct, ambiguity tolerance, and critical and creative thinking. These skills have a positive correlation with graduates' employability, making them essential in assessing their employment chances.

To summarize, as AI becomes more prevalent, graduates need to be prepared to handle problems in the workplace by having strong soft skills and IT knowledge. They need to be self-sufficient to adjust to constantly demanding work requirements. Failure to do so will impact the employment of fresh graduates. In addition to technical capabilities like database building, coordinate computation, and report writing, employers look for applicants with "soft" talents like teamwork, communication, leadership, and report writing (Surina & Suhaimi, 2024).

Employers and educational institutions are gradually realizing the importance of giving people the abilities, know-how, and skills that will help them succeed in the job market by supporting their professional development throughout their careers and facilitating their integration into the workforce after graduation.

6. Suggestion for future research

Due to the limited sample size in this study, future research with a larger number of participants is recommended to improve the statistical power and to detect any potential effects that may not have been observable in this exploratory study.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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