A Study of Employability Skills: From the Employers and Youth Perspectives

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Abstract **- The issues of skills mismatched among the youth and employers appear to be very intense in Malaysia. The unemployed youth are actively seeking jobs and trying to fulfill the criteria needed by employers to get hired. However, many failed to fulfill the requirements due to skills mismatched. This situation does not show that the supply meets the demand in terms of youth employment and job vacancies. Thus, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of employers and youth regarding the employability skills required by the youth to secure employment and any disparities in their perceptions. This study was a cross-sectional survey research design and employed a quantitative method by distributing a set of questionnaires that adapted from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) to two groups of respondents which are employers (n=375) and youth (n=384) in Batu Pahat, Johor. Descriptive analyses and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to analyze the data. The findings showed significant differences in the perception levels of employers and youth regarding most of the employability skills assessed except for Basic Skills. The results from this study can be used to enhance the understanding of employability skills as well as to be the guidelines for policy-making decisions to find mutual expectations and reduce the expectation gaps between these two groups.**

Keywords **-** *employability skills, youth unemployment, employer's perception, youth's perception, sustainable development goals, job market*.

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I. Introduction

In the 21st century, the youth are different from the old days. In Malaysia, youth can be categorized as young Malaysian aged from 15 to 30 years old (Malaysian Youth Policy, 2015). Based on the statistic released by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES), there are 9,000,700 youth aged from 15 to 30 years old in Malaysia (IYRES, 2020a). This data indicates 27.5% of the total population of Malaysian citizens which is 32.7 million (DOSM, 2020). As youth make up quite a large proportion of the Malaysian population, they are the future inheritors of a fully developed and modern Malaysia (Wan Mohd Noora et al., 2016). In April 2020, according to the secondary data from IYRES (2020b), 9,331 youth with tertiary education levels lost their job during the pandemic COVID-19. Besides, 7,207 youth from the secondary education level also lose their job followed by 413 youth from the primary level of education (IYRES, 2020b). In this economic crisis, the unemployment issue is severe and needs to be taken into consideration (Mohd Puad, 2016).

The high unemployment rate among youth can have adverse economic implications. According to Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA) (2017), unemployed youth are unable to contribute

significantly to the country's economic development, particularly during this critical stage of economic recovery. As the youth constitute a significant proportion of the Malaysian population, they play a crucial role in boosting consumer demand and tax revenue (ILMIA, 2020). In Malaysia, recent statistics indicate that youth unemployment is caused by several factors, such as insufficient work experience, skills, education levels, and skills that do not match the requirements of the job market. Employers prioritize communication skills during the hiring process, followed by work experience, interpersonal skills, passion, and commitment. This information was provided by the Ministry of Finance in 2019 (Shakur et al., 2020).

In today's job market, securing a job requires more than just excelling in education. Practical skills and personal attributes gained through on-the-job training are crucial for youth to be employable (Ornellas, 2018; Reddy, 2019). Employers seek candidates who possess these employability skills, as they contribute to better job performance, benefitting not only the individual, but also the workforce, community, and economy (Reddy, 2019; Rohanai et al., 2020). In fact, without employability skills, there is a decline in competitiveness and economic returns (Rohanai et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2016). It is therefore important for youth to develop these skills to enhance their job security and contribute to society's growth and development.

Youth unemployment is a critical issue that has persisted in many countries such as Nigeria (Olojuolawe et al., 2022), South Africa (Habiyaremye et al., 2022), Lebanon (Dibeh et al., 2019), Brunei (Musa & Idris, 2023) and also Malaysia (Toh, 2017). One of the main reasons for this issue is the mismatch between the skills that graduates possess and those that employers demand (Rohanai et al., 2020; Olojuolawe et al., 2022; Habiyaremye et al., 2022). This mismatch has resulted in a decline in competitiveness and economic returns (Rohanai et al., 2020). The lack of awareness of important employability skills is also a significant factor contributing to youth unemployment (Ifeoma, 2018). Soft skills, such as leadership, communication, and networking skills, are increasingly important in enhancing employability when jobs are scarce (Habiyaremye et al., 2022). Therefore, education managers of higher institutions need to modify the higher education curriculum to reflect the skills required by employers (Olojuolawe et al., 2022).

The initiative in educational institutions should highlight the needs of the industry and students by creating awareness and guiding the students in self-analysis and in the acquisition of skills (Rohanai et al., 2020). The effectiveness of lifelong learning policies on youth employment is also affected by regional labor market situations (Huang, 2018). Employers and employment counselors identify a well-prepared job applicant, job fit and a good attitude, and soft skills as enhancing young workers' employability (Lindsay et al., 2014). However, youth with disabilities are perceived to be at a disadvantage (Lindsay et al., 2014). In conclusion, addressing the mismatch between the skills that graduates possess and those that employers demand, creating awareness of important employability skills, and providing soft skills training is essential to tackle youth unemployment.

Besides, the issues of skills mismatched among the youth and employers appear to be very intense in Malaysia. This statement is supported by the data extracted from the Institute for Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA), a total of 108,717 youth aged 15 to 24 years old applied for vacancies in Jobs Malaysia from the year 2017 until 2019. 66,716 applicants, which represent 61.4% of the total number are unemployed (IYRES, 2019). At the same time, there are 18,500 vacancies offered by employers all over Malaysia through Jobs Malaysia. These statistics showed that unemployed youth are actively seeking jobs and trying to fulfill the criteria needed by employers to get hired. However, many failed to fulfill the requirements due to skills mismatched. This situation does not show that the supply meets the demand in terms of youth employment and job vacancies. Thus, the difference in perception between employers and youth towards employability skills needs to be identified; so that expectation gaps can be reduced.

Hence, based on the problems stated above, this study aimed to examine the significant difference between employers' and youth's perceptions of employability skills. This paper is organized into several sections; the next section (Section 2.0) reviews the literature related to employability skills, employers' and youth's perceptions of employability skills, hypothesis development and conceptual framework. Section 3.0 explains the methods applied in this study. The next section discusses the results of the research, and the final section is the conclusion.

II. Literature Review

Overview of Employability Skills

The concept of employability skills in developed countries such as Australia and Canada, had become a blueprint to developing countries such as Singapore and Malaysia; as it is related to the economic development of the nation (Alrifai & Raju, 2019). Employability skills encompass a combination of both soft and hard skills or competencies that are necessary for workers, as defined by Benjamin et al. (2013). Soft skills pertain to behaviors and aptitudes, such as teamwork, that are considered essential for employment, whereas hard skills are specific and quantifiable skills like creating a cover letter or resume. Ismail et al. (2019) have broadly defined employability skills as the basic academic, personal, and teamwork skills that employers anticipate from their employees and that the educational system is expected to develop. Hillage and Pollard (1998) have identified three definitions of employability: gaining initial employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment when required. Lefresne (1999) defined employability skills as the ability of individuals to find a job or emerge from unemployment in a period. Employability skills are very important, to adapt changes in the

work environment as well as retain on current job, reducing the unemployment prospects of a person (Naanda, 2010). Mohamad Zuber et al. (2020) defined employability skills as the skills that are needed by job seekers to be in the state of "job readiness" and at the same time prepare themselves to become competent and competitive worker to be in the job market. Zakaria et al. (2017) have stated that employability skills are crucial for success in the 21st century and can be developed by providing effective vocational training to ensure that students are ready for employment after graduation.

The theory of employability could be difficult to identify. However, there are several frameworks or models developed by certain organizations described on the set of employability skills. For example, in the United States of America, Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1991) divided employability skills into two; fundamental skills and workplace competencies. In the fundamental skills, there are basic skills, thinking skills and personal qualities. On the other hand, in workplace competencies, there are five variables including resources, interpersonal, information, system and technology. The basic skills that employers expect from workers include reading, writing, arithmetic, listening, and speaking. Thinking skills are also important, such as creativity, decision-making, problem-solving, visualization, learning, and reasoning. In addition to these, personal qualities like responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity, and honesty are highly valued. Workplace competencies that young people should develop to succeed in the world of work include identifying, organizing, planning, and allocating resources, working effectively with others, acquiring and fully utilizing information, understanding complex relationships, and utilizing various technologies (SCANS, 1991).

Besides, The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia (2002) have identified eight essential competencies or skills required in the workplace which include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning, and technology. In the United Kingdom, three core skills were defined communication, numeracy, and information technology. However, this was later extended to include three wider skills which are working with others, improving own learning and performance, and problem-solving, all of which are necessary for achieving success in employment (Turner, 2002). The concept highlighted in past studies about employability skills revealed a common trend in the set of skills that are required to get employed. Skills such as communication (listening and speaking), problem-solving, learning, organizing, and technology are among the skills that are highly required by employers.

Employability Skills in 21st Century Based on Malaysian Context

In the coming 21st century, the perception of employability skills is changed due to the world facing massive changes such as Industrial Revolution 4.0 which implement automation and technology advancement. The job market also changes rapidly in terms of human capital, recruitment, and employment. The impact of technological advancement and the changes in workplace organization, demand a higher level of skills than ever before (Naanda, 2010). Fitrisehara et al. (2009) suggested that employability is linked to individuals who possess certain strong characteristics such as high self-awareness, productivity, competitiveness, determination, creativity, and innovation to cope with the challenges of globalization in the 21st century.

There are several arguments from existing studies regarding the employability skills needed in the context of the 21st century. The researchers agreed that the set of employability skills needed in the job market nowadays consists of several elements that include knowledge, technical skills, ICT skills, problem-solving, communication skills, teamwork, leadership as well as professionalism and ethics (Nazrona et al., 2017; Munohsamy, 2015). According to Fitrisehara et al. (2009), graduates who are looking for job opportunities in the current era should possess a set of employability skills that include basic skills, thinking skills, resource or capability skills, information skills, interpersonal skills, system and technology skills, and personal quality skills. Rahim and Ivan (2007), indicates that, besides acquiring technical skills, youth also need to acquire employability skills in order to get hired because variation of skills can make the candidates unique.

Yuzainee et al. (2011) concurred that in the face of dynamic changes in the Malaysian economic landscape, employability skills in high demand include communication skills, problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, and the ability to work effectively in a team. According to Alrifai and Raju (2019), communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving skills are the top three critical skills required to excel in a highly competitive job market. In this present study, after the comparisons made to the employability skills practiced before and after the 21st Century; it can be concluded that the employability skills that are relevant for youth to practice in facing uncertainties are; basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource or capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills and also system and technology skills as adopted from SCANS (1991) and adapted to Malaysian Context.

Employers' Perception on Employability Skills

Employers' decisions on recruitment bring a major impact on an organization's future performance level. Mansor et al. (2014) proposed in a previous study that the main objective for a company to open job vacancies is to find and hire the most competent candidates to improve organizational outcomes. It is very important from the employer's perspective, for the job seeker, to be in the "work readiness" state and well-equipped with

employability skills. According to Kenayathulla et al. (2019), employers commonly seek a particular skill set from job applicants that align with the skills required to fulfill a specific job.

Yunus (2007) emphasized that employers believe that youth must recognize the significance of employability skills and comprehend how they relate to work practices. In addition, Kaur et al. (2008) stated that the higher the position of the employer in the organization, the greater their expectations for the skills required by candidates or employees, owing to their industry experiences and expertise. Referring to Murugan and Sujatha (2020), employers highly value a range of skills in potential employees, including basic skills, communication skills, computing skills, technological skills, stress tolerance, effective language, conflict resolution abilities, empathy, and academic knowledge.

Johri (2005) argued that poor-quality employment can lead to negative consequences for employers, such as decreased worker morale, commitment, and productivity, as well as increased turnover, recruitment costs, and workplace accidents. To avoid these consequences, employers need to seek out candidates with strong skills, including basic academic skills like reading, writing, mathematics, and communication, as well as higher-order thinking skills like problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity (Kenayathulla et al., 2019). Therefore, employers' expectations of high employability skills are reasonable, as they align with organizational goals and requirements.

Youth Perception of Employability Skills

In Malaysia, the youth are defined as individuals between the ages of 15 and 40 years old, but the government's development programs primarily focus on those aged between 18 to 25 years old (Yunus, 2007). Unfortunately, according to the International Labor Organization (2023), the growth of employment opportunities worldwide has decreased in recent years, resulting in higher rates of unemployment or underemployment among young people and greater economic and social instability. To tackle this problem, the Malaysian government has taken action by adopting a resolution focused on youth employment. This resolution aims to create new employment options and establish clear pathways for decent work (Yunus, 2007).

Three challenges that youth in Malaysia faced in finding jobs include globalization; rapidly changing labor markets which contribute to unstable employment; and the complexity of work (Yunus, 2007). Kenayathulla et al. (2019), indicated that the youth perceived they were not exposed to the employability skills that are highly demanded by employers such as problem-solving and communication skills. Dania et al. (2014) reported that youth's employability skills are at an average level; as those skills were influenced by their self-perception, industrial training, and participation in career development activities. Encouraging youth to explore career options early and equipping them with the necessary skills to enter the job market is crucial (Yunus, 2007).

Another study by Fitrisehara et al. (2009) stressed that youth perceived that they could gain employability skills by attending training and skills that were similar to the occupational situation or on-the-job training. Ramli et al. (2010), suggested that the ability and willingness to learn and gain new skills and knowledge is needed in order to be more competent and enhance employability skills. Job seekers need to be technically prepared and sharpen their employability skills to secure and stay on the job (Lee et al., 2019). At the same time, parents, educators, counselors, government agencies and departments as well as youth leaders have big roles to play to help prepare the youth for entering the industries. Therefore, youth perceptions towards employability skills are important in order to identify their level of understanding and competencies; further interventions and plans can be made to ensure the youth have a high level of perception towards employability skills.

Hypothesis Development

From the previous studies, the most employability skills that had been studied based on the Malaysian context were basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource and capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills, and system technology skills (SCANS, 1991; Rahim and Ivan, 2007; Fitrisehara et al., 2009; Dania et al., 2014; Rasul et al., 2012; Majid et al., 2022). According to the earlier study, students rate their basic skills lower (Hedrick et al., 2015). Critical thinking and problem-solving need the development of basic skills (Suryani et al., 2021). Additionally, employability assessment has a strong emphasis on the development of thinking, resource management, system, technology, and interpersonal skills (Kadel, 2021). The technology revolution values both cognitive and non-cognitive skills including communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Kim & Park, 2020). Therefore, it is essential for youths' preparation for the job market and comprehension of gaps to study a set of these employability skills in Malaysia. The gap between graduates' skills and employers' expectations may be filled by evaluating and improving these capabilities (Nadarajah, 2021). Hence, it is crucial to equip young people with essential employability skills, which include basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource and capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills, and system technology skills.

The first employability skill is basic skills that relate to the essential academic, personal, and teamwork skills that employees are expected to have (Ismail et al., 2019). Communication, listening, presence, teamwork, accountability, honesty, adaptability, empathy, and the capacity to make reasonable and critical judgments are examples of these skills (Nugraha et al., 2020; Hanafi et al., 2019). Basic skills are critical for adjusting to the job, getting along with colleagues and leaders, and effectively contributing to the organization (Hanafi et al.,

2019). Individuals must develop and demonstrate basic skills to improve their employability and thrive in their employment (Rasul et al., 2012).

The second skill is thinking skills which refer to the capacity to analyze, solve issues, and think critically in the workplace (Campos et al., 2020; Dalimunthe et al., 2019). These skills help people to contribute successfully to work efficiency, make wise judgments, and produce new ideas (Amirullah, 2017). Employers emphasize thinking skills since they help with problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity (Campos et al., 2020). Individuals must develop and demonstrate thinking skills to improve their employability and thrive in their employment (Campos et al., 2020). Employers value problem-solving skills, such as critical thinking, when determining a candidate's employability (Gedye & Beaumont, 2018).

The third skill is personal quality skills which defined as are traits and characteristics that contribute to an individual's overall professionalism and work ethic (Nugraha et al., 2020). Presence, collaboration, accountability, honesty, adaptability, and empathy are examples of these skills (Nugraha et al., 2020). Personal qualities are valued by employers because they reflect an individual's capacity to work well with others, take ownership of activities, demonstrate integrity, adjust to changing circumstances, and express empathy towards colleagues and customers (Rahmat et al., 2018). Personal quality skills are seen as essential for individuals to flourish in their job and effectively contribute to their organizations (Smith, 2007).

The fourth skill is resource and capability skills, which relate to people's talents and competencies that allow them to successfully contribute and realize their potential within an organization (Venkateswarlu, 2012). This ability has evolved differently between the student and the employer, with varied conceptions of what is necessary for success in the job and in life (Misra & Khurana, 2018). Employers gave this competence a higher ranking than students did. As a result, to be successful in obtaining a job, candidates must have this competence. Individuals must have resources and capability skills to satisfy performance standards, adapt to job needs, and contribute to the achievement of organizational goals (Pavlin, 2014). Developing and leveraging these skills is crucial for individuals to enhance their employability and meet the requirements of future work environments (Bowles et al., 2019).

The fifth skill is interpersonal skills, which refer to the capacity to successfully communicate, collaborate, and engage with people in a professional situation (Fei, 2017). Strong communication skills, teamwork, leadership, and the capacity to develop and sustain connections are examples of these talents (Tanius et al., 2019). Employers focus on interpersonal skills because they contribute to a healthy work atmosphere, effective team dynamics, and successful client contacts (Rasul et al., 2012). Individuals must develop and demonstrate good interpersonal skills to improve their employability and flourish in a professional context (Fei, 2017).

The sixth skill is information skills which include the capacity to effectively organize and use the information to assist decision-making and problem-solving (Tong & Gao, 2022). Critical thinking, information literacy, communication, and lifelong learning are examples of these skills (Tong & Gao, 2022). Employers respect information skills because they enable people to obtain, analyze, and apply relevant information in the workplace (Liu, 2020). Picatoste et al. (2018) investigated the influence of information and communication technology (ICT) skills on young people's employability in the European Union. The study found that raising awareness of the importance of IT skills is critical to increasing adolescent employability. Individuals must have excellent information skills to improve their employability and participate successfully in today's information-driven settings (Ridenour et al., 2022).

The last skill is system technology skills which include knowledge, talents, and abilities connected to using and functioning with various technological systems and tools (Rasul et al., 2012). These skills include proficiency in using computer systems, software applications, hardware devices, and other technical resources relevant to the workplace (Majid et al., 2022). Employers place a high value on system technology skills because they contribute to productivity, efficiency, and flexibility in a technology-driven work environment (Ismail et al., 2019). Individuals with these abilities may efficiently navigate and use digital platforms, analyse data, handle technological difficulties, and keep current with evolving technology (Nugraha et al., 2020). It is critical for individuals to develop and demonstrate good System technology abilities to improve their employability and remain competitive in today's businesses.

The major issue of skill mismatch between youth and employers is a big obstacle that must be solved for youth to find jobs. Previous research has found disparities in perception across several employability abilities (Hanapi & Kamis, 2017; Ong et al., 2022). These differences can be explained by sector-specific considerations (Hanapi & Kamis, 2017), varying values put on certain abilities (Ong et al., 2022), and the effect of cultural and demographic variables (Rohanai et al., 2019). Furthermore, the significance of employability skills in improving job security, competitiveness, and economic rewards has been highlighted (Rohanai et al., 2019). In addition, the significance of employability skills in improving job security, competitiveness, and economic rewards has been highlighted (Rohanai et al., 2019). Misalignment in perceiving the value of employability skills has also been discovered among employers, graduates, and academicians (Tanius et al., 2019). The disparities between the relevance and competency of employability skills have been investigated, particularly in the hotel industry (Kenayathulla et al., 2019). Other research has focused on graduate preparation for the changing job market (Teng et al., 2019) and the relationship between active learning and employability skills (Rohanai et al., 2019). It is

crucial for educational institutions to address the needs of industries and guide students in acquiring and enhancing employability skills (Rohanai et al., 2019).

Based on the discussion above, thus, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards Basic Skills.
H2: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards Thinking Skills.
H3: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards Personal Quality Skills.
H4: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards Resource and Capability Skills.
H5: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards Interpersonal Skills.
H6: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards Information Skills.
H7: There is a significant difference in perception between employers and youth towards System and Technology Skills.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework proposed in this study. This conceptual framework provides a structured representation of how different stakeholders perceive the set of employability skills including basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource and capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills, and system technology skills, highlighting the importance of understanding the perspectives of both employers and youth in assessing these skills' significance in the job market.

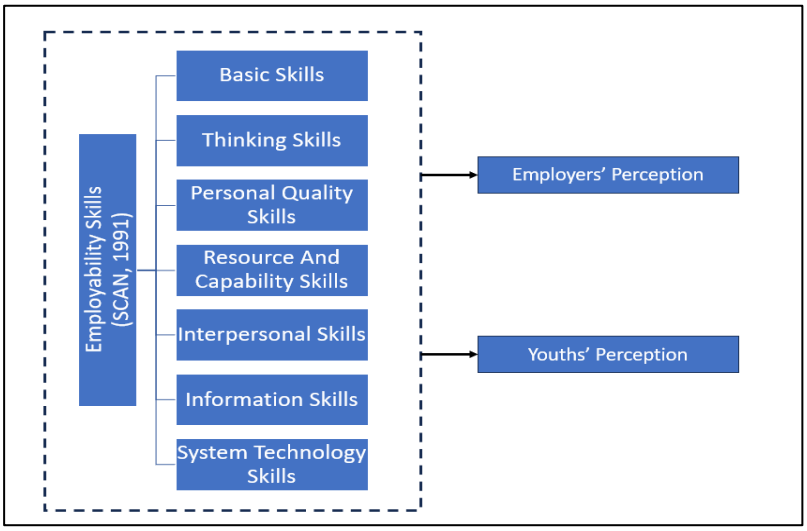

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

III. Methodology

This study used quantitative research methods and a cross-sectional survey research design to collect data from two groups of respondents, youth (aged 18 to 30 years old) and employers in Batu Pahat, Johor. The population size of youth and employers in Batu Pahat was 150,000 and 14,000 respectively (DOSM, 2020; MOHR, 2020). Therefore, by referring to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size for youth and employers was 384 and 375 respectively, using convenience sampling. This study utilized two sets of questionnaires as research instruments.

The questionnaires were adapted from Fitrisehara et al. (2009) and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) in 1991 and were modified to fit the Malaysian context. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) was a US government commission established in 1990 to examine the demands of the workplace and to determine what skills were necessary for individuals to succeed in the workplace. In 1991, the commission produced a report called "What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000" which identified five competencies and a set of foundation skills that were necessary for success in the workplace. The five competencies were: resources, interpersonal skills, information, systems, and technology; while the foundation skills included basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities. The report has since been widely used to inform the development of education and training programs.

Set 1 was designated for the youth participants, while Set 2 was designated for the employers. The questionnaire consisted of two parts, namely Part A and Part B. Part A aimed to gather the demographic profile of the respondents, including gender, age, race, education level, and employment status. Meanwhile, Part B comprised seven parts representing the seven employability skills. These skills include basic skills (5 items),

thinking skills (6 items), resource and capability skills (5 items), information skills (4 items), interpersonal skills (6 items), system and technology skills (5 items), and personal quality skills (9 items). Each question in Part B was answered using the 5-point Likert Scale, with 1 indicating "Strongly Disagree," 2 indicating "Disagree," 3 indicating "Neutral," 4 indicating "Agree," and 5 indicating "Strongly Agree."

Data collection for this study was conducted from March to June 2021, using Google Forms and distributing the link to respondents via email and WhatsApp due to COVID-19 restrictions. Follow-up was done through phone calls and reminder emails. Descriptive and inferential analysis were employed for data analysis, including calculating percentages for demographic profiles and using the Mann-Whitney U test to determine significant differences between the perceptions towards employability skills of youth and employers. IBM SPSS version 20 software was used for data analysis.

IV. Results

Reliability Analysis

In the pilot test, the questionnaire was distributed to 36 respondents; whilst in the actual study 653 respondents were tested. Respondents of the study consisted of youth and employers from Batu Pahat, Johor. The data obtained from the questionnaire in the pilot test and actual study were tested using Cronbach's Alpha method. The highest Cronbach's Alpha value in the pilot test is 0.948 for Thinking Skills (TS) and the lowest Cronbach's Alpha value is 0.790 for Personal Quality Skills (PQS). In the actual study, the highest value of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.946, which is the Thinking Skills and the lowest value of Cronbach's Alpha in the actual study is Basic Skills with the value of 0.838. The values of Cronbach's Alpha for each variable in the pilot test and actual study is above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006) which indicates high reliability for the questionnaire.

Response Rate

The questionnaire was randomly distributed by an online platform such as Google Form and Whatsapp Application. Set 1 was distributed to the youth respondents and Set 2 was distributed to the employers' respondents. There were 306 questionnaires answered by the youth which reflected 72.5% of the response rate and 347 questionnaires answered by the employers which reflected 92.5% of the response rate for this study.

Demographic Analysis

The demographic background of two respondent groups, youth and employers, will be explained in terms of gender, age group, ethnicity, education level, and employment status. Descriptive analysis, including frequency and percentage methods, will be used to analyze the demographic information of the respondents.

For the demographic analysis of the employer respondents, most of the respondents were male (66%), with 229 respondents. In terms of age group, the highest percentage of respondents were from the 31-40 years old group (40.6%), followed by the 41-50 years old group (32.9%), 51-60 years old group (22.2%) and 20-30 years old group (4.3%). The majority of respondents were Malay (73.8%), followed by Chinese (12.4%), Indian (11.8%) and other races (2.0%). In terms of education level, bachelor's degree holders represented the highest percentage (53.9%), followed by master's degree (20.2%), SPM/SPMV and STPM/Diploma/Matriculation and Foundation holders (8.6% each), PHD holders (6.1%) and PMR/PT3 level (2.6%).

In terms of the youth respondents, the majority of respondents were female, accounting for 71.2% of the total, while male respondents made up 28.8%. With regards to age group, the highest percentage of youth respondents were in the 21-25 age range, representing 52.9% of the sample, followed by those aged 18-20 (22.9%), 36-40 (10.1%), 31-35 (8.8%), and 26-30 (5.2%). Many respondents identified as Malay (63.4%), followed by Indian (24.8%), Chinese (9.5%), and other races (2.3%). As for education level, most respondents held a bachelor's degree (46.1%), followed by those with SPM/SPMV qualifications (26.1%) and STPM/Diploma/Matriculation/Foundation qualifications (25.5%). Only a small percentage of youth respondents held a master's degree (2.0%) or a PhD (0.3%). Additionally, most youth respondents were employed (53.9%) compared to 46.1% who were unemployed.

Difference in Level of Perception between Employers and Youth towards Employability Skills

Since the sample size was more than 50 respondents, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used and analyzed to test the normality. Table 1 shows the p-value was 0.000 which is less than 0.05; indicating that the data was not normally distributed. This normality result led to the decision to choose non-parametric analysis which is the Mann-Whitney U test. Mann-Whitney U test analysis was used to determine the rank and significant difference between the level of perceptions of youth and employers towards employability skills.

Table 1: Test of Normality

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	**Df**	**Sig.**	**Statistic**	**Df**	**Sig.**
Basic Skills	Youth	0.253	306	0.000	0.735	306	0.000
	Employers	0.303	347	0.000	0.719	347	0.000
Thinking Skills	Youth	0.294	306	0.000	0.727	306	0.000
	Employers	0.200	347	0.000	0.785	347	0.000
Personal Quality Skills	Youth	0.303	306	0.000	0.635	306	0.000
	Employers	0.190	347	0.000	0.757	347	0.000
Resource Capability Skills	Youth	0.360	306	0.000	0.694	306	0.000
	Employers	0.183	347	0.000	0.813	347	0.000
Interpersonal Skills	Youth	0.273	306	0.000	0.746	306	0.000
	Employers	0.197	347	0.000	0.776	347	0.000
Information Skills	Youth	0.338	306	0.000	0.702	306	0.000
	Employers	0.183	347	0.000	0.830	347	0.000
System Technology Skills	Youth	0.296	306	0.000	0.753	306	0.000
	Employers	0.131	347	0.000	0.861	347	0.000

Table 2 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney U test analysis for all employability skill variables among two groups - employers and youth. The test determined whether there is a significant difference in mean ranks between the two groups. According to Table 2, the statistical analysis showed that the p-value for Basic Skills was greater than 0.05 (Z = -0.192, p = 0.848), indicating that there is no significant difference in perception levels between employers and youth. This finding suggests that H1, which hypothesized a difference, is not supported by the data. However, the remaining six categories of employability skills showed a p-value less than 0.05, namely, Thinking Skills (Z=-3.640, p=0.000), Personal Quality Skills (Z=-6.000, p=0.000), Resource and Capability Skills (Z=-5.765, p=0.000), Interpersonal Skills (Z=-4.261, p=0.000), Information Skills (Z=-5.828, p=0.000), and System and Technology Skills (Z=-6.561, p=0.000). Therefore, the results of the analysis support hypotheses H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7, indicating a significant difference in perception level between employers and youth towards Thinking Skills, Personal Quality Skills, Resource and Capability Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Information Skills, and System and Technology Skills.

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U Test analysis

H	Employability Skill	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig.	Hypothesis Testing
H1	Basic Skills	52651.50	-0.192	0.848	Not Supported
H2	Thinking Skills	44753.00	-3.640	0.000	Supported
H3	Personal Quality Skills	39301.50	-6.000	0.000	Supported
H4	Resource Capability Skills	39960.00	-5.765	0.000	Supported
H5	Interpersonal Skills	43230.00	-4.261	0.000	Supported
H6	Information Skills	39752.00	-5.828	0.000	Supported
H7	System Technology Skills	37716.00	-6.561	0.000	Supported

V. Discussion

The Mann-Whitney U test analysis revealed significant differences in the perception levels of employers and youth regarding most of the employability skills assessed (thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource and capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills, and system technology skills). The presence of differences in perception levels between employers and youths regarding employability skills aligns with findings from other studies. Lokaj et al. (2021) conducted a study that underlines the links between soft skills and work readiness, implying that young people may have different ideas of the relevance of these skills than employers. Furthermore, Teng et al. (2019) contribute to this understanding by examining student perceptions of the skills they learn at university as well as the value of soft skills for future employment. These various points of view might explain the Mann-Whitney U test's large disparities in perception levels.

Added to that, Ivanova et al. (2016) emphasize the complexity of employability, which includes personal and academic skills as well as demographic characteristics that may impact graduate employment. This highlights the multifaceted nature of employability skills and the need of considering a variety of criteria when analyzing perception levels. Furthermore, Lindsay et al. (2014) discovered that employers and employment counsellors had distinct judgments of desired abilities for entry-level occupations, which might explain the disparities identified in the current investigation. Overall, these findings indicate the necessity for a complete knowledge of employable skills from many viewpoints, as well as the need of matching employer and youth conceptions to bridge any gaps and improve employability prospects in Malaysia.

However, in terms of basic skills, this study indicated no significant disparities in the perception levels of employable skills between employers and the youth. This indicates a reasonably comparable view of the value of basic skills in the context of employability, reflecting a common perspective of their importance in job markets. Both employers and youth agree on the importance of basic skills in the context of employability skills since they constitute the foundation of an individual's employability. In today's increasingly competitive and technology-driven labor market, improving basic skills is critical for individuals to increase their competitiveness, job security, and economic rewards (Ismail et al., 2019).

To summarize, while the perception levels of basic skills may be similar between employers and youth in Malaysia, differences exist in the perception of other employability skills. These variations necessitate comprehensive efforts to align stakeholders' understanding of the importance and mastery of employability skills to enhance graduates' readiness for the job market. Overall, the research results suggest that there is a gap between the perception of employability skills between employers and youth, which needs to be bridged by providing effective training and education programs that emphasize the development of the most crucial employability skills, particularly those that are undervalued by the youth.

VI. Conclusion

The study examined the perception of employability skills between youth and employers in Batu Pahat, Johor. The study found a significant difference between the perceptions of employers and youth regarding employability skills. According to the findings, youths must connect their perceptions of employability skills with the expectations of employers. It is critical for young people to grasp the precise skills and abilities that employers appreciate, such as basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource and capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills, and system technology skills. This understanding can assist young people in acquiring and improving these talents to fulfill the expectations of their job market.

Furthermore, the differences in perception levels emphasize the necessity of employers explicitly communicating their expectations and criteria for employability skills to potential applicants. Employers should give detailed job descriptions and guidelines that explain the exact skills and competencies they want, such as basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource and capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills, and system technology skills. This can assist in bridging the gap between company expectations and youth perception levels, resulting in a better fit between work needs and candidate abilities.

Overall, these implications emphasize the need for effective communication and understanding between employers and youth to enhance employability prospects and ensure a better alignment of skills in the job market. The study suggests that the quality of employability skills can highly influence the sustainability of the youth in their career path and development. Therefore, an effective guideline and resolution should be made to enhance the employability skills of youth, boost their confidence, and encourage them to be in a state of work readiness. Future researchers can expand the study's scope by comparing the perceptions of youth according to gender, age group, and education levels, which can further aid policymakers in reducing the unemployment rate among the youth in Malaysia.

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