

EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATION AND PREFERENCE OF GRADUATES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study are to examine the causes of graduates' unemployability, preferences of employers, employer expectation towards graduates, the most essential skills and good quality graduates in terms of attitudes towards work and personality in Malaysia. Qualitative method is engaged whereby semi-structured interview is conducted among eight selected employers who are big and medium-size organizations in Malaysia. Interview data obtained are analyzed according to themes. The results show that the leading cause of unemployability of graduates is lack of soft skills especially communication skill. Type of university, whether local or overseas, is the preference of the graduate to be employed. Employers expect graduates to be equipped with social skills, whereby communication skills top the list. Good quality graduates as perceived by employers as important are emotional intelligence, long-life learning and fast learner. Some solutions are proposed by employers to mitigate the problem.

Keywords: employability, preference, expectation, graduate, Malaysia

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysian graduates face a lot of challenges. The problem increases after graduation as they have suffered an issue of unemployability. Various causes have been established by previous studies such as the curriculum itself either the content of the programmes, the type of the university and the mismatch with the industry's needs. While Graduate Tracer Study (2007-2015) indicated that the main reason for unemployment for fresh graduates is that they are still looking for jobs (Ooi, 2018). In the Graduate Tracer Study, unemployment simply indicates unemployed graduates without excluding out voluntary unemployed graduates.

On the other hand, JobStreet.com reported that asking for high salary/benefits, weak attitude or personality, poor command of English language, and choosy about the job/company are the main causes of unemployability (Zulkifli & Rajoo, 2016). The Star in 2010 had reported that five reasons of why graduates are not employed are attributed to lack of industrial training, poor English,

lack of problem-solving skills, job-hopping and lack of confidence. However, Ooi's study (2018) proves that salary, picky and bad attitude are not the reasons for being unemployed, but the background of the unemployed graduates are.

In Malaysia, the number of an unemployed first-degree graduate is higher than postgraduates (Ooi, 2018). Thus, first-degree graduate or student is the focus of this study. The real graduate unemployment rate was increasing from 24.31% in 2008 to 24.86% in 2015. Human Resource Deputy Minister, Awang Hashim reported that based on the 2016 Graduate Statistics Report, there were 145,800 or 4% unemployed graduates in 2016, 154,500 (4%) in 2017, 161,300 (3.9%) in 2018 and 170,300 (3.9%) in 2019 (Bernama, 2020). Regarding the field of studies that have majority unemployed are arts, social sciences and applied sciences streams such as HRM, business, accountancy (NST, 17/8/2017) which are majority Malays (Diana, 2017).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employability

The word of employability in the context of the workplace and employment market refers to the possibility that an individual would be employed by an organization due to matching competencies with the demands and expectations of potential employers. Masura et al. (2011) also agreed that employability is a term that is often used as a measurement by employers on graduates' employability. It is believed that a university graduate has a greater chance to be employed if he or she possesses certain competencies attributed to the successful of tertiary education delivery. In general, according to most definitions, the key factors for employability are graduate's skills, capabilities, competencies and attributes (Morshidi, Chan, Munir, Shukran, Seri Rahayu & Kaur Singh, 2012). Stiwne and Alves (2010) define 'employability' as aspects of 'behavioural competence' and the students' capacities to show a range of personal, performative and organisational skills rather than the possession of traditional academic, theoretical knowledge and skills.

Meanwhile, Lim (2008) defines employability as a graduate's labour market outcomes and a number of days unemployed or probability of unemployed. Lim states that on average, the graduates are experiencing a total of 138 days of being unemployed which is equivalent to 4.6 months. This explains that

employability refers to the success or failure of graduates in getting a job within six (6) months after graduating. However, this study conceptualizes employability as the ability of university students to be employed by possessing certain attributes such as attitude and personality. These attributes are important to ensure that graduates are able to contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions

2.2 Attitude

In employability context, Kahirol, Nor Lisa, Mimi, and Lai (2017) defined attitude as positive behaviour toward job tasks. In short, attitude refers to students' job behaviour which is bounded by their beliefs and feelings e.g. self-confidence, self-directed, hardworking, willingness to learn, positive attitude towards work, ability to reason and adaptability (Norshima, 2011).

There are conflicts of researchers over the concept of attitude. According to Md. Shamsuri & Izzaidin (2014); Nazron, Lim & Nga (2017); Morshidi et al. (2012); Zainudin & Ahmad Zamri (2017); Yusof & Jamaluddin (2015); Noor Shuhailie (2013), attitude is a category of employability skills. While Ab Malik, Townsend, Mohamad and Md Ramli (2014) state that an attitude is a form of competency. Meanwhile, Aida, Norailis & Rozaini (2015); Nurkaliza, Nor 'Adha, Rahmatunnisah, Norziah, Abdul Hadi, Mohd Farok (2014) and Seetha (2014) categorized attitude as a soft skill. However, Farouk (2009) refuted that attitude is a combination of knowledge, values and abilities.

According to Fehintola (2017), employers are looking for attitudes such as personal attributes or character, positive attitude, i.e. capabilities in completing job tasks. While Cohn, Maréchal, Schneider and Weber (2016) classified attitude as reliability and cooperativeness, teamwork, adaptability, patient, honest, reliable, self-directed, and goal-oriented. Zulkifli and Rajoo (2016) categorized attitude as self-confidence, positive and professional. While Amen (2014) stated that attitude consists of characteristics such as aptitude and willingness to learn, creativity, self-discipline, self-motivation, commitment and dedication. Morshidi et al. (2012) studied on positive attitudes such as proactive, hardworking, motivation and curiosity. Meanwhile, Kuo, Chang, and Huang (2014) studied on working attitude i.e. proactive, active, assertive, ambitious, adventurous, cooperative, cheerful, and achievement oriented.

2.3 Personality

Cheng (nd) defines personality as a multifarious human characteristics and variables. Several authors have related individual's personalities to their jobs, contextual performance and characteristic behavioural patterns that differentiate them from others in a labour market (Nwogu & Momoh, 2015; Potgieter & Coetzee, 2013). In this respect, the personality term on employability takes the persons as the main subject for their employability qualities. This includes the individual's personal attributes which enables him or her to master over different, problematic and demanding situations (Vanhercke, Cuyper, Peeters & Witte, 2014; Noorah, et al. 2013). On this basis, the personality characteristics are correlated with good social adjustment for work success and it is said that these characteristics determined work performance outcomes more than technical abilities (e.g. vocational characteristics). Therefore, success in work for individuals may depend on their readiness to adjust to the work environment rather than their knowledge and certain job skills.

According to Farouk (2009), personality is the consequence of soft skills in a specific context. Most previous study analysed graduates' personality attributes in terms of big five personality traits which include openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and emotional stability traits. Examples of openness are imaginative, curious, unconventional, forward thinking and cultured, while disciplined is a type of conscientiousness, consultative, competent, order, dutifulness and thorough. Meanwhile, extroverts are sociable, assertive, gregarious, talkative, and ambitious; courteous, flexible, trusting, good-natured, cooperative, forgiving, softhearted and tolerant are agreeableness qualities and emotional stability means adaptability or adjustment (Nurazariah & Salina, 2012; Noor Azina, 2011).

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative method to obtain responses from industries on the graduates' employability particularly on the issues of factors contributing to unemployment among graduates, employers preferences in selection of the employees, employers' expectation from graduates, the issues relating to soft skills, good quality of graduates in regards to attitude and personality and the role of university in developing soft skills. In order to

get the actual scenario on the above, the researchers have conducted face to face interviews with respondents as this approach is the most suitable way to obtain specific information (Salkind, 2009). Furthermore, it gives the researcher an ability to access directly what happens in the world. (S; (Silverman, 2015).

Last but not least, for the validity of the interview questions used by this research, those questions, though self-constructed, were mainly based on the reliable sources of collected literature focusing on the employability of graduates. Moreover, the interview questions have been piloted and the researcher have sought opinions from the experts such as experienced lecturers and employers from industries. Accordingly, some questions were edited and amended in order to assure clarity and unambiguous meaning. Therefore, the interview questions' validity was achieved.

i) Overview of Respondents for Qualitative Method

Overall, 8 organizations participated in the interviews from March to October 2018. A majority of respondents are big players in industries serving the Human Resource Department. They are employers of companies ranging from small, medium to big four. They were selected based on certain criteria such as their position, years of experience and department. These criteria prove that they are the key informants who can give reliable feedback on the issues studied. The sampling is considered sufficient to support the reliability of the findings as there is no specific requirement for the number of respondents in qualitative research (Wilmot, 2010),

ii) Interview Questions for Qualitative Method

This research has used guided discussion interviews. This approach was adopted as the researcher can expect the nature of information to be obtained (Sekaran, 2003; Clark, 2000). The structured interview questions were developed based on the previous literature and some of them were self-constructed. Apart from that, this research also used the unstructured interview questions in seeking the respondents' views and perceptions.

iii) Conduct of Interview and Data Gathering for Qualitative Method

Prior to the interview, the respondents were identified and selected based on the above mentioned criteria. The appointment was set up through phone calls or Email. To warrant the smooth flow of the interview, the interview questions were emailed to the respondents before the interview

date so that they can have a clear picture of the information expected from them. In addition, it gives them a reasonable time to prepare their responses. The length of the interview per respondent is one (1) to two (2) hours. For the sake of convenient, the respondent had obtained prior consents from the respondents to record the interview conversation and all of them had consented to be recorded.

iv) Ethical considerations

There are some ethical considerations for this research topic. The researchers had highlighted to the respondents about the objectives of the study. In addition, they were warranted that their answers will be treated strictly confidential and will be used solely for academic purpose. On top of that, the researchers maintain a level of comfort for all respondents/participants and ensure they were not harmed physically or mentally during the interview process. Due to confidentiality, the identity of the respondents was not disclosed in the findings of this study.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics are used to describe the quantitative data such as frequency table, mean and standard deviation.

4.1. Data Analysis Procedure for Qualitative Method

The process of transcription of the interview scripts had been done immediately after each interview. The analysis is based on the frequencies of the respondents' feedback. The adjustment was made to the responses and certain feedbacks were removed if overlapping with others. In order to analyze the data, content analysis was used to assist in comparing the data as they are not measurable. The data gathered will be divided into themes and subthemes, depending on their relevancy. The content analysis helps in reducing the data and make it simpler to compare and also helps to produce results that could be measured using quantitative techniques. Content analysis also gives the ability for a researcher to analyze the data to ensure the objectives are obtained (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2012). Due to confidentiality, the respondents are labelled as R1, R2, R3....R stands for respondents.

4.2. Qualitative Results: Interview Results

A. Demographic Profile of the Employers

We interviewed ten (8) employers. All of them are big players in industries and majority of them are of big four companies. Majority of respondents are female and within the ages of 50 and above. Most of the respondents possess a minimum of degree qualification. They are attached to Human Resource and Marketing Department.

Most of the respondents interviewed have served the industries for more than 30 years and the rest are between 20 to 30 years experience. They held a various position such as senior manager, chief executive officer, general manager, deputy director, director, executive director, HR group manager, vice president and chief marketing officer.

B. Causes Of Unemployment

The research has identified the cause of unemployment among graduates. Among other causes mentioned during the interview, a lack of soft skills is proven to be the main cause of unemployment. The majority of the respondents unanimously agreed that the graduates must be equipped with strong soft skills in order to be more successful in their life individually and professionally. As pointed out by R7:

From my experience, most candidates did not meet the soft skills required by the employer. These skills are essential. There are candidates who demonstrate an unequal ability to the qualifications he or she has at a university.

Other criteria trigger unemployment among graduates is, they are not academically qualified. It is mentioned by six employers that due to the low academic achievement, the graduates failed to meet the requirement and expectations of the industries. R1 expresses his concern:

For our industry, their academic qualification is most important as well as a good understanding of ethics and governance.

Another factor causing unemployment among graduates is, the well-off of their families. Those who are from a strong financial standing family background found that they are not in a desperate condition to rushing for a job upon graduation. Thus, they tend to enjoy their live and make no effort to search for a job since for them; it is not a necessity.

Apart from family background, other factors which affect graduates' employability are picky, due to factors such as salary. In view of this perception, R8 labels the graduates as 'picky' in his comment on this issue:

Most of them are picky....they are always putting a large sum of salary as their sole priority rather than experience. They will only work for a few months due to the salary factor...

Last but not least, graduates' preference for flexible working hours, economic slow-down, and cheaper foreign labour also perceived as causes for unemployment.

These findings were supported by previous studies that found poor communication skills were the reason of unemployability (Lim, 2015; Luna, 2016; Zaliza & Mohd Safarin (2014), Zulkifli & Rajoo, 2016). Furthermore, lack of problem-solving skills (Luna, 2016; The Star, 2010; Zaliza & Mohd Safarin, 2014) and lack of confidence (The Star, 2010) are the next reasons of why graduates are not employed. Undergraduate students attached to the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology (FCSIT) of one public university for example, attributed to lack of ICT proficiency contribute to unemployment. On the other hand, majority of the graduates of FCSIT attributed unemployment to lack of interpersonal skills. This shows the difference of the expectation of the undergraduate students and working graduates (Ramakrishnan and Norizan, 2011). All of these are examples of soft skills expected by the employers from the graduates to practice these skills upon being employed by them.

Bernama reported in September 2020 that low CGPA as one of the factors that graduates are denied from jobs besides the mismatch between the candidates' field of study and the job market. Shahidan, Ismail and Jumali (2019) found that the percentage of overeducated graduates keep on increasing, and the majority of them engaged in the labour market as clerks and sales workers. Farooq (2011) stated about one-third of the graduates are facing education-job mismatch. In similar, more than one-fourth of the graduates are mismatched in qualification, about half of them are over-qualified and the half are under-qualified. The analysis also shows that 11.3 percent of the graduates have irrelevant and 13.8 percent have slightly relevant jobs to their studied field of disciplines. In Malaysia, according to Azmin, the previous ministry of

economics, seven out of 10 of graduates were from the humanities courses, but cited six out of 10 job vacancies as being in the technical and vocational sectors (Ibrahim, 2019).

C. Employer's Preferences In Selection Of Employees

In selecting the employees, there certain references to be relied on by employers. While some respondents prefer to choose overseas graduates rather than local, the majority of them are of the view that this criterion is not a matter as long as the graduates can perform and meet their expectations. Being probed with the choice of whether they prefer graduates from public or private universities, the majority of the respondents who responded to this question seem to decline this criterion in selecting the employees. In contrast, they made some remarks which impliedly indicates that graduates from private universities are more preferable. The reasons are, those graduates are more extrovert, properly equipped with the required softs skills and high exposure.

Another significant finding is, the respondents give extra credits to the graduates who can speak the third language such as Mandarin, Japanese and Arabic. This requirement is relevant especially for international based companies involving in commercial deals with global partners.

Apart from that, two respondents mention that ethnicity sometimes is a matter as it happens that some of the graduates prefer to work with their same ethnic group. Last but not least, one respondent mentions the gender as one of their preferences in selecting the employees.

The finding of this study is supported by Quah and Azzat, Guok and Ignatius (2009)'s study who found Malaysian employers tend to favour overseas graduates over twinning or local graduates in their recruitment drive. This is because their study found that foreign graduates perform better than local graduates in terms of communication skills, confidence/positive self-image, leadership/problem-solving skills, and creative/innovative skills.

D. Employers' Expectation From Graduates

Once again, the soft skills element gained the highest responses, followed by technical knowledge from the graduates, and academic achievement. This element is significant in industries involving in industries technical based. Simultaneously, some respondents expected English efficiency. Last but not

least, actively involves extra curriculum activities is also one of the aspects expected by the respondent and ability to do work. It is expressed by R1:

Most importantly is for graduates to have soft skills...good attitude, an inquisitive mind, the attitude to keep going despite challenging circumstance. These are all, of course, additional attributes on top of academic qualification and required technical knowledge.

Soft skills are known as employability qualities needed by the employers that comprise of leadership skills, communication skills, a positive work attitude and teamwork (Setha, 2014). In the same vein, MQA (Malaysia Quality Accreditation) categorized soft skills that should be inculcated in Malaysian tertiary education as problem solving, communication, decision making, team work, professionalism, social and ethical conduct, leadership skills. This study finding concurs with Zafir, Ishak and Abd Hair (2015)'s study that the highest employers' expectation are the soft skills such as communication and interpersonal relation, leadership, decision making, problem solving and teamwork. Setha (2014) identifies critical skills for workplace success should include communication, interpersonal, team work, critical thinking, leadership and problem solving. Meanwhile, Azami, Yuzainee, Mohd. Zaidi, Azah, Norhamidi, Ramli (2009) affirm that employer expect creativity, innovative, competitive, independent and communication skills in graduates.

Technical skills refer to subject-specific or content-specific knowledge and competence relevant to, or within, a particular discipline such as information technology or psychology. (Cassidy, 2006). Hossain and Alam and Salat (2020) affirm that both soft skills and technical skills are positively related to employability as perceived by students.

CGPA is the only source for interview selection, however; success in interview depends on the ability of the graduates (Mohd Suhaimi). According to Stiwne and Alves (2010), employers in Bologna pay less importance to academic credentials.

Reardon, Lenz and Folsom (1998) studied on the representatives of organizations participating in Florida State University's fall 1997's career exposition whereby respondents were asked to rate the importance of eight non-classroom activities. Results show employers view work experience,

leadership roles, participation in pre-professional organizations, and volunteer work to be important for employment eligibility.

The definition of 'extra-curricular activities' (ECAs) was broad and included all activities beyond 'the classroom' such as involvement in university clubs and societies, paid and voluntary employment, family commitments, religious engagement and internet activities. (Stuart, Lido, Morgan & May, 2011). Stuart et al (2011) asserted that extra-curricular activity is a basis in distinguishing' candidates and providing evidence of cultural fit and leadership in terms of sociable, outgoing and extrovert. From their study, they found extra-curriculum activity as additional information on graduate selection. Akinrinmade and Abiodun (2017) found no significant difference between the perception of public and private organization employers on the extent to which extracurricular involvement influences graduate employability. The study also revealed that employers perceived that extracurricular involvement influences graduate employability to a moderate extent. Employers are seeking to recruit individuals who pay due attention to relations with peers and superiors as well rounded persons (Suartha, Suwintana, Sudhana & Hariyanti, 2017).

Yusof and Jamaluddin (2015) agreed on workability as the employability skill that graduates are unable to fulfill the expectation of the employer. Meanwhile, Abdul Hamid, Islam and Abd Manaf (2014) that English language usage is the most important employability skill as perceived by the employer.

E. Most Important Soft Skills

This research has identified the most important soft skills as perceived by the respondents. The category of soft skills is based on the scale developed by Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) as all the academic programs offered by the universities in Malaysia are regulated by MQA. These skills are used in this research as a guide in developing the interview questions.

The finding reveals that the most important soft skills highlighted by the respondents is communication skills. Previous research has marked communication to include verbal communication, giving and receiving feedback, effective presentations and participation in meetings (Jackson, 2013). This skill has been recognized as the most highly demanded skills by employers. (Post, et al., 2017; Alpert et al., 2009; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Williams, 2015). In pursuant to these findings, R1 emphasizes:

The ability to communicate is very crucial in graduates. It is a key factor that we look for in graduates, being able to bring messages across in all circumstances, especially in stressful conditions.

The similar remark pointed out by R7:

We always observe the way how graduates interact with peers and superiors...

The second important skills frequently mentioned by the respondents is, emotional intelligence skills. The concept of emotional intelligence has been defined as 'an array of emotional and social abilities, competencies and skills that enables individuals to cope with daily demand and be more effective in their personal and social life' (Bar-On & Ruderman, 2003). Apart from the above skills, other important skills mentioned by respondents are teamwork, ethics and professionalism, critical thinking skill, creative thinking and leadership. Last but not least, problem solving and entrepreneurship skill.

Moeti, Mgawi, Moalosi (2017) concurs that critical thinking is one of the skills that employers expect the graduates to be competent with. Similarly with Suarta et al. (2017), communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and teamwork skills are the attributes of employability skills with highest importance level. Graduates are also expected to have a number of personal attributes included: self-awareness, self-confidence, independence, emotional intelligence, flexibility and adaptability, stress tolerance, creativity and initiative, willingness to learn, reflectiveness, lifelong learning, and professional behaviour. According to Adebakin et al. (2015), skills required of university graduates as perceived by employers were analytic and problem solving (98%), decision-making (98.3%), leadership (98%), information and communication (97.7%), team-work (99%), official communication (97.7), English proficiency and literacy skills (97%), risk management (96.7%), while skills possessed by university graduates were English proficiency and literacy (58%) and information and communication skills (53%). There was no significant difference existed between public and private university graduates on their skills as perceived by the employers.

F. Good Quality Graduates – Attitude

Good quality graduates is crucial to convince the employers. This research has categorized good quality based on attitude and personality of graduates. It is proven that those graduates with emotional intelligence and long life

learning are recognized by the majority of respondents as having a good quality, followed by ethics and professionalism and teamwork. Apart from that, the respondents also appreciate those graduates who are equipped with communication and leadership skills. This is important as generation Y is said to have serious attitude problem (Kaliannan, Abraham & Ponnusamy, 2016) such as picky and choosy (Krish, Osman, Subahan and Zanaton, 2014). Thus, positive attitude is very much expected of graduates (Lim, Teck, Ching, and Chui, 2016). Examples of positive work attitudes are willingness to learn and to work (Williams, 2015). Atif and Faizuniah (2016) found that emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between personality and employability. This shows how important emotional intelligence is at workplace. Yee, Kui and Wei (2015) asserted that employers demand a more independent and leader instead of a follower. Other than this are communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, entrepreneurship, ethics and professional skills, leadership skills, lifelong learning and information management skills and team work.

G. Good Quality Graduates – Personality

Majority of the respondents prefer graduates who are fast learners. This indicates that being a fast learner, they can handle new things and carry out new responsibilities easily by watching or following instructions. It has been unanimously admitted by the respondents that this kind of personality can expedite the process of training of the new graduates since they have the ability to learn lessons, topics, or concepts at a faster rate.

JobStreet.com reported that poor personality was one of the reasons of why graduates are not employed (Zulkifli & Rajoo, 2016). Fast learning of this study's finding could be categorized in conscientiousness dimension of the big 5 personality theory. Conscientiousness is the propensity to demonstrate self-discipline, to be dutiful and to strive for achievement and competence (Nurazariah and Salina, 2012). It is found out that conscientiousness people gain greater satisfaction from work. They are more effective and organized (Engelhardt, 2017). Conscientiousness comprises two related aspects which are achievement and reliability (Timothy, nd). Henceforth, Nurazariah and Salina (2012) study findings suggest that improvement should be made by the Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia on a specific personality development component pertaining to conscientiousness personality for technical graduates as part of tertiary curriculum development strategies.

R2 states:

We really appreciate those graduates with fast learning personality as they are able to learn fast and deliver good results...

Similar perception has been emphasized by R3:

We prefer the graduates who easily blend...it facilitates us to carry out our roles...

Other favourable personalities highlighted by the respondents during the interviews are, graduates who can work under stress. Apart from that, the result indicates the graduates who are creative and independent personality are deemed to be of good quality. Next are flexible and extrovert personalities. Last but not least, diligent and disciplined.

This study findings are supported by Ganesan, Talwar, Norsiah and Oon (2018) that some graduates can tolerate some level of stress as it can trigger them towards change and growth. To employer, this indicates that the graduates are able to suppress their personal and other problems and maximize their performance. Furthermore, they have coping strategies on how to deal with the problems and focus more on their success.

Abbasi, Ali and Bibi (2018) concur that creative and critical thinking is important for certain jobs but not for banking industry as they have to comply to strict regulation and operation. Khalil (2016) too supported on extrovert individuals who are good at articulating their ideas and thought than introvert. This makes them preferable by the employer than introvert. Moreover, they can communicate more effectively in a team. However, they tend to make snap judgment and decision.

H. Are Graduates Equipped With The Right Skills In The Employability Stakes?

Based on the responses, majority of the respondents gave positive perception to this issue. Premised on the belief that this perception warrants further justifications, the researchers have provoked the respondents with the questions on why they have come to this anecdotal view. In view of this matter, the respondents admit that the process of transition from university life to real life working condition will take some time for the graduates, as pointed out by R7:

There are no candidates who are fully ready when out of school... more needs to be improved if you are here. Exercises related to the scope of work and the needs of the organization will be coordinated through courses or training.

In addition, there are respondents who are not satisfied that the graduates have equipped with the right skills while others agree that some of them have fulfilled the skills required by the employers. It has been commented by R1:

I believe universities in this day and age are realizing the importance of involving employers in their education syllabus. We have seen encouraging signs of this happening and would be happy to support such initiatives from universities.

Adebakin et al. (2015) reported that there is disparity between the skills acquired by university graduates and the ones needed by employers of labour in Nigeria. Most often, employers of labour prefer to employ university graduate who have self-confidence, optimist and those who can bring innovation to the work place. Employers also value critical thinking as this is required for innovation and anticipatory leading change.

I. How Should Employees Gain Required Skills?

The responses indicate that there are two ways highlighted by the respondents, that is, through a training program and continuous learning. R1 shares their approach on training program:

If employees as in our firm employees, we have a robust training schedule for all client-facing roles. This is mandatory on top of mentoring programmes our internal mobility programmes and many more.

Some of the respondents suggest that the internship program should be three years or more in order for the training to be effective. Others suggest that continuous learning may include English programme and English test should be implemented to improve communication skills among the graduates.

This study findings were supported by Kalufya and Mwakajinga (2016) whereby Career Advisory Services (CAS) at HEIs should create short term programmes on employability such as internship and work based learning such as part time jobs. According to Kapareliotis, Voutsina and Patsiotis (2019), industrial training exposes the student to the real working environment with more practical issues rather than theory. As a result, students feel more confident about how to effectively use their skills in the workplace.

J. Developing Soft Skills – The Role Of University

Again, hands-on training forms majority responses suggested by the respondents. In contrast, R1 highlighted:

Soft skills, in my opinion, are not something that can be taught over one or two workshops or classes. It will have to be taught and then practiced as a lifestyle in order for it to be effective.

This is supported by Sodipo (2014) that students should do their Students Industrial Work – Experience Scheme (SIWES) in places relevant to their discipline so as to have hands-on experience and be familiar with the latest and modern equipment before they get employed. Furthermore, entrepreneurship development programmes should be institutionalized to equip the students with lifelong learning processes and entrepreneurial spirit. On vocational skills acquisition, artisans or master craftsmen should be brought in to mentor the students properly while in school.

Other suggestions highlighted are, the university must increase co-curriculum activities and to prolong the internship period to more than three months.

This is supported by Sharon Milner, Cousins and McGowan (2016) that extra-curricular activities is a way of developing desirable skills and attributes by employers such as motivation and interest, organisation fit, skills and work experience. Subramanian, Nagappan, Mathew (2012) stated that some employers also found that the interns on second internship were of better quality due to the impact of first internship and support sessions empowering them with the necessary employability skills. The second internship provides interns with another opportunity to demonstrate skills acquired through attending support sessions.

Last but not least, according to the respondents of this study, the university should from time to time improve the syllabus to ensure the subjects taught are in line with the industries development, organize industrial talks by inviting speakers from industries to share technical knowledge and encourage students to involve with corporate social responsibility (CSR). The respondents also highlight that the university can conduct workshops on communication skills to improve communication skills among students.

Zaliza and Safarin (2013) concur that the implementation of curriculum of the study area should be evaluated in order to ensure the implemented curriculum can produce human resources, which are qualified, skilful and can fulfil the need of the industries and the current market. The curricular in all disciplines must be reviewed from time to time and drawn in consonance with what the employers of labour require to meet with current realities. These are mainly skills that reflect Technical or Professional knowledge Attributes / Behaviour, relevant IT skills and other life skills.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The main cause of unemployability of Malaysian graduates according to the selected employers in this study is lack of soft skills. Thus, they have high expectation towards the graduates on soft skills. The employers are pressed for profitability and sustainability, thus; by looking for certain values that have connection with high job performance, they can save money in the long run whereby substantial retraining graduates is considered as wastage. The most important soft skill to the selected employer in this study is communication skill. This contributes to the next reason of their preference of graduate to be employed is the type of their university whether it is local or overseas university. According to the employers in this study, good quality graduates are emotional intelligent, conscientiousness and long life learning. In contrast to their expectation, majority of the selected employers believe that graduates are prepared with employability skills. However, the employers propose the graduates to sit for further training especially hands on training in a way to enhance their soft skills. All in all, their preference and expectation on certain skills and quality of graduates are due to their main objective that is to increase their revenue and sustainability. Employers are expected to employ the right person. Thus, it is important for universities to better understand employer skills requirements, so that their graduates can better meet those requirements as well as the crucial wider educational objectives of a university degree. In 21st century workplace, it is important for higher education institutions to design and implement programs that are appropriate to the missions and goals to supply the workforce relevant to the needs of stakeholders or employers (McMurray, Dutton, McQuaid & Richard, 2016).

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