

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS VALUED BY EMPLOYERS IN MALAYSIA*** Khairul Azhar Jamaludin**

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Abstract: Developing students' employability skills is pivotal in preparing them for future workforce. However, mismatch between graduates' employability skills and the needs of industry, has resulted in unemployment among our local graduates. The current study is motivated to review selected studies that explored employers' perspectives on relevant employability skills to the industry. With reference to Malaysian Qualification Framework, the findings of the current study indicated that basic skills, thinking skills, personal qualities, workplace competencies and entrepreneurship skills were important to the local industry. However, some of the employers viewed employability, decision-making and leadership skills as least important skills in working field. It is hoped that the findings of the current study will serve as a reference point in enhancing education platform in equipping students with relevant employability skills.

Keywords: *technology in language education; content analysis; selected articles; online journals; Academic Search Premier @EBSCOhost*

INTRODUCTION

Education is believed to be a prominent platform to produce skilled workers for our country. As highlighted in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), in producing skilled labours for future, the access, quality, equity, unity and efficiency in education system should be improvised to suit the rapid changes in technology, knowledge and skills for the current industry, and the social and business landscape of today (Ministry of Education, MOE, 2015). One of the primary focuses highlighted in the blueprint is to equip students with transferrable skills, ethics, and entrepreneurship skills. These skills, or known as employability skills are undeniably important to help graduates to secure and sustain a job (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004; Robinson, 2000).

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (1992), categorizes employability skills into four competency clusters based on an extensive research across 50 fields of occupations: a) basic skills, b) thinking skills, c) personal qualities, and d) workplace competencies. SCANS (1992) describes basic skills as reading, writing, listening, speaking and arithmetic skills. Thinking skills refer to creativity, reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and learning skills. Personal qualities refer to positive attitudes required by employers such as responsibility, high self-esteem, sociable, integrity, honesty and self-management skills. Lastly, workplace competencies cover resource management, interpersonal, and information skills. Lerman (2013) supported that these highlighted skills are prominent skills valued by employers and thus, inculcating them in education and training system is pivotal to help overcome the weak outcomes for working fields in the United States.

In the localized context of Malaysia, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) is a guiding beacon for higher education and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions in providing graduates that are relevant to the industry. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) (2017), specifies that this framework serves as a foundation for qualification standards for all post-secondary education line from various sectors and as the medium to enhance the quality of implementation and management of education. In line with UNESCO's efforts to produce skilled workers through effective training system in TVET institutions, this framework highlights the importance of developing

ethical, personal, cognitive, and functional competence or skills. MQA (2017) stated that the revised version of this framework has added the relevant competencies or skills that are valued by the current industry in Malaysia. In the revised MQF (version 2.0), MQA (2017) noted that the ethical competencies consist of personal development, personal values management (lifelong learning, career and educational growth), ethics (work ethics, professional ethics, practices and professionalism) and social responsibility. Personal competence refers to leadership and working-in-team skills, as well as the ability to take autonomy in work and responsibility. Cognitive competence refers to students' knowledge and comprehension of learning. Lastly, functional competency covers the application of skills in work, such as ICT (Information and Communications Technology)/digital technology, communication, interpersonal, numeracy and entrepreneurship skills.

In reality, Malaysia is still facing a challenge in producing workers with high employability skills. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DSM) (2015) noted an increase of unemployment rate among graduates from tertiary education institutions, from 17.43% in 2010 to 30.67% in 2014. The shift from manufacturing to service sector in current industry requires more high-skill workers with tertiary education qualification (Dobbs & Madgavkar, 2014). Evidently, our graduates are still struggling to secure a job relevant to their qualification (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Singh, Narasuman & Thambusamy, 2012). Therefore, it is very important to ensure that our graduates are equipped with employability skills that are highly valued by the current industry.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The widespread evidences of difficulties of our graduates to secure a job relevant to their qualification are presented in the literature. A number of studies have revealed that our tertiary education graduates are struggling to secure a job in the industry. Pandian and Narasuman (2004), Ismail et al. (2011), and Shuib (2005) have appointed that fresh graduates from our local universities and institutions are still lacking in their employability skills. Even worrying, the graduates with excellent academic achievement are struggling to secure a job relevant to their qualification (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Singh, Narasuman & Thambusamy, 2012). The Ministry of Education (2015) explained that one of the contributing factors to this pressing issue is "there is a mismatch in the supply and demand of graduates, with employers reporting that graduates lack the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes." (p.12). Similar to Lerman's (2013) stance, the mismatch between education outcomes and industry needs, is a possible justification to this issue. Mourshed, Patel and Suder (2014) found that the youth unemployment across the European Union countries such as in France, German, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, is rooted in a poor interaction between education and training institutions with industry.

Other than working skills, a number of researchers believe that developing "generalisable" skills is very important (Burganova & Valeev, 2015; Tabbron & Yang, 1997), which include information and communication skills. These skills are not restricted to a specific working field and thus, are very beneficial to increase their contribution to the industry. In Malaysia, studies such as Pandian and Narasuman (2004), Ismail, Yusof & Lai (2011), and Shuib (2005) have explored how employability skills are important and found to be lacking among our fresh graduates. Communication skills are found to be important, yet still lacking among our graduates. Other employability skills are immensely important as well but are depending on types of industry sectors. Therefore, it is challenging to generalized what type of skills should be developed across all industry. An analysis of relevant generalized skills are very beneficial. In untangling this issue, this paper is motivated to explore the employability skills that are valued by the industry in Malaysia. This paper is aimed to explore the relevant employability skills valued by the industry through analysis recent studies that focus on relevant employability skills required by various sectors in Malaysia. Hence, this paper seeks to answer: a) What are the employability skills valued by the local employers? b) do these skills in line with employability skills highlighted in MQF?

METHODOLOGY

The current study applied content analysis in answering the research questions. Gray and Densten (1998) highlighted the importance of content analysis in providing important information from the textual data depending on the specific area of study. Since the current study was specifically identifying employability skills that are valued by local employers, studies from 2012 to 2018 that explore relevant employability skills required by various sectors in Malaysia were selected. The keyword search includes "employability in Malaysia", and "employability skills in Malaysia". In answering the research questions, only studies that reported the relevant employability skills from the industry perspective are selected and analyzed in this study. It is found only five recent studies that focus on relevant

employability skills required by various sectors in Malaysia from employers' perspective are suitable for the review. These article are cross analysed in order to identify the employability skills that are highly valued. The findings are also compared to the employability skills highlighted in the MQA, to further understand the needs of employability skills in Malaysian context.

FINDINGS

The highlighted employability skills in SCANS (1992), and competencies or skills to employment in MQF (MQA, 2017) are almost identical. This is because the MQF is developed based on a thorough comparison of relevant employability skills highlighted in “regional” employability frameworks such as ASEAN Reference Qualifications Framework (AQR), Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, National Qualification Framework of South Africa, New Zealand Qualification Framework and other Asian national qualification frameworks. Figure 1 below represents the relationship between framework proposed by SCANS (1992) and MQF.

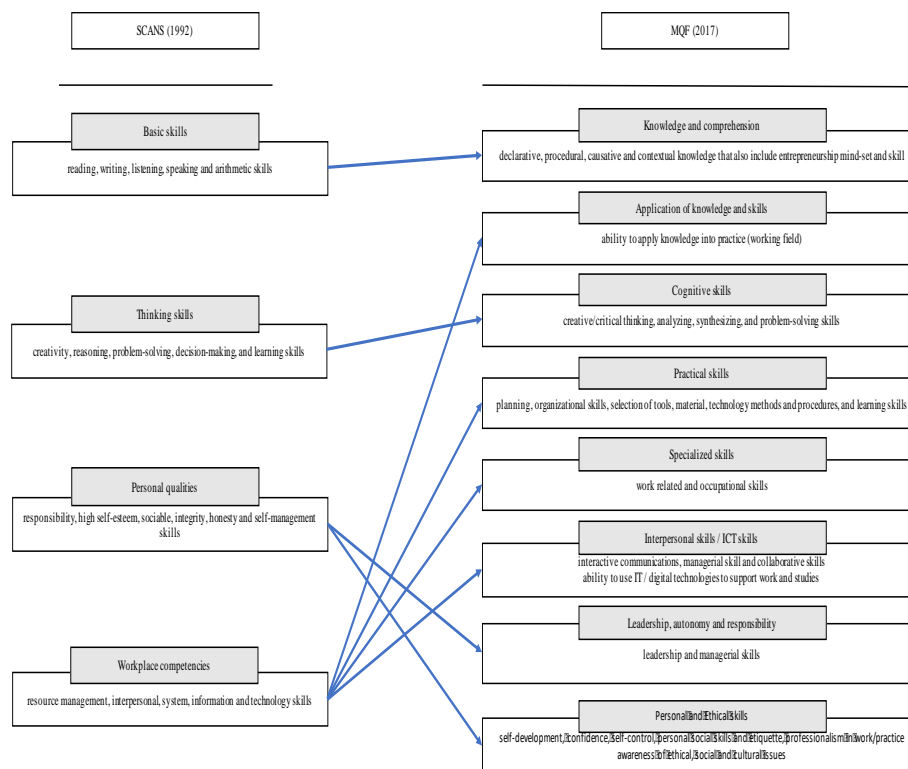


Figure 1. Relationship between SCANS (1992) and MQF (2017)

Even though both frameworks appear to share similar focus on relevant employability skills for the industry, MQF has provided additional element, which is entrepreneurship skills as important skills to be equipped among graduates in Malaysia. MQA (2017) explained that entrepreneurship skills are the combination of “...skills business skills, interpersonal skills and personal attributes.” (p.24). In fact, in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025, MOE (2015) has highlighted the importance of developing entrepreneurial mindsets in producing graduates who not only depending “seeking job” skills but to be able to “create job”.

Ideally, both frameworks are important reference for education and training institutions to produce skilled workers for the industry. However, with current situations – the mismatch between education outcomes and industry needs, as discussed in a number of literature (Lerman, 2013; Mourshed et al., 2014; Nagendra, Radha & Naidhu, 2013; Oxtoby, 1997), there is a need to further explore this situation in Malaysian context.

Five studies published that focus on relevant employability skills from the perspective of employers, are summarized in Table 1 below. The relevant employability skills as highlighted by SCANS (1992) and MQF are used as the basis of comparison of employability skills valued by employers across all selected studies.

Table 1
Employability skills that are valued by employers in Malaysia

Study	Buntat et al. (2013) (agriculture field)	Rasul et al. (2013) (manufacturing field)	Zaharim et al. (2012) (engineering field -soft skills)	Singh, et al. (2014) (multinational and local organizations) ^[1] _[SEP]	Muda et al. (2012) (Various industries)
Highlighted skills					
Basic Skills					
Reading skills		/			/
Writing skills		/			/
Listening skills		/	/	/	/
Speaking skills		/	/	/	/
Arithmetic skills					
Thinking skills					
Creativity	/	/	/		
Reasoning skills		/	/		
Problem-solving skills		/	/	/	
Decision-making skills	/	/	/		/
Learning skills			/	/	
Personal qualities					
Responsible		/	/	/	
High self-esteem		/			
Sociable		/	/	/	
Integrity		/	/	/	
Honesty	/	/	/	/	
Self-management skills	/	/	/	/	
Leadership		/	/	/	/
Workplace competencies					
Resource management skills					
Interpersonal skills	/	/	/	/	/
System skills			/		
Information skills	/	/	/	/	

Technology skills	/	/	/	/	/
Entrepreneurship skills					
Knowledgeable		/			
Intellectual skills					
Business skills		/		/	
Others	Acting positively towards change	Adaptability to working environment			

Based on the above table, the employers from manufacturing sector require almost all the employability skills. In this study, Rasul, Rauf, Mansor, Yasin and Mahamod (2013) have surveyed 107 employers who are operational managers, chief executives and supervisors with working experience of less than two to more than 20 years. These employers are from transport equipment, machinery and equipment, electrical and electronic product, metal-based product, and other product-based sectors. The findings suggested that these employers have rated high for almost all employability skills. For instance, thinking skills are rated high by employers with mean between 4.26 to 4.79. In addition, technology skills are rated high with mean between 4.00 to 4.37, personal qualities with mean between 4.35 to 4.80, basic skills with mean between 4.20 to 4.35, and thinking skills with mean between 4.26 to 4.79. However, Rasul et al. (2013) found that information skill, specifically the ability to manage acquired information, is rated moderately by the employers. Through an in-depth interview with selected participants, it is found that the employers from manufacturing industry valued graduates with skills to retrieve information from various sources, analyze, organize, process and maintain information, learn independently, and actively share ideas and information with others.

In another study by Zaharim, Ahmad, Yusoff, Omar, and Basri (2012) have surveyed 337 employers (with only 301 usable responses) from engineering industry. These employers held different positions such as chairman, chief officer, director, manager, senior engineer and others. In this study, Zaharim et al. (2012) focus to propose a formula on soft skills calculation for graduates' performances in the field. Based on the survey, ten skills clusters are first identified in Zaharim et al.'s (2010) framework and ranked based on its importance. This framework is developed based on survey on the importance of all ten skills clusters that are ranked according to their level of importance. It is highlighted that communication skills that consist of listening and speaking skills, giving instructions and understand and communicate in English is ranked first out of all ten skills clusters. This is followed by teamwork skills, professionalism, problem-solving and decision-making skills, working competencies, knowledge on science and engineering, lifelong learning, knowledge on contemporary issues, competencies of engineering field, as well as engineering system approach.

Zaharim et al. (2012) found that communication, teamwork, professionalism, problem-solving and decision-making skills are among the skills highly valued by employers in engineering field other than technical skills. Lifelong learning skills are viewed less important by employers compared to the aforementioned skills because the employers believe that graduates would be able to master this skill when they start working.

In agriculture field, Buntat, Jabor, Saud, Mansor, and Mustaffa. (2013) have conducted a study to investigate the 150 employers and 130 instructors' expectations of relevant employability skills that should be equipped among graduates from agriculture training institutions. Very interestingly, the employers from agriculture field ranked personal qualities which are honesty as the highest skills required ($M=4.87$), followed by interpersonal skills ($M=4.77$), technology skills ($M=4.77$), decision-making skills ($M=4.72$), resource skills (time management) ($M=4.66$), and creativity ($M=4.60$). On the other hand, the instructors focused on developing students' interpersonal skills (cooperating ($M=4.32$) and working in team ($M=4.22$)), personal qualities (honesty ($M=4.21$) and self-esteem ($M=3.84$)) basic skills (listening and speaking ($M=3.97$), thinking skills (problem solving ($M=3.88$)). Buntat et al. (2013) explained that among the contributing factors to this situation are instructor's poor understanding of employability skills ($M=4.05$) and lack of focus of employability skills development in curriculum ($M=4.02$).

Other two studies (Muda et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2012) have explored employers' perception from various sectors on relevant employability skills that are expected from our fresh graduates. Singh et al.'s (2012) have surveyed 124 employers (from public and private sectors) and 126 instructors (from three public universities) in Klang Valley. The findings suggested that communication skills are highly valued by employers ($M=4.44$, $SD=0.58$) and instructors

($M=4.53$, $SD=0.59$), and are followed by integrity and professional ethics with $M=4.44$, $SD=0.65$ (employers) and $M=4.47$, $SD=0.75$ (instructors). However, entrepreneurship ($M=3.61$, $SD=0.89$ from employers' perspective, and $M=3.86$, $SD=0.94$ from instructors' perspective) and leadership skills ($M=3.94$, $SD=0.86$ from employers' perspective, and $M=4.05$, $SD=0.75$ from instructors' perspective) are ranked lowest among other employability skills.

Similarly, Muda et al. (2012) study on 148 students in Industrial Training programme and 136 employers from various sectors, has similarly found that communication skills as the most valued skills among students with mean of 4.622, and employers with mean of 4.257. On the other hand, leadership and decision-making skills are ranked the lowest among other employability skills. The employers viewed decision making as least valued skills (with mean of 3.973) and is followed by leadership, with mean of 4.155. The students viewed leadership as least valued (with mean of 3.868) and is followed by decision-making skills, with mean of 4.022.

Based on the selected studies, it can be concluded that among the highly valued skills by local employers are communication and interpersonal skills. This is in line with the current needs in global industry. As mentioned by Tabbron and Yang (1997) and Burganova and Valeev (2015), these skills (termed as generalizable skills) are very important to enhance graduates' employability in the current global industry.

Clearly, the employability skills emphasized in the MQF (MQA, 2017) are found to be relevant to the current industry settings. In almost all selected studies, basic skills, thinking skills, personal qualities, workplace competencies and entrepreneurship skills are valued by employers from various sectors. However, in two studies (Muda et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2012), entrepreneurship, leadership and decision-making skills are ranked lowest among other employability by employers. Even so, this does not mean that these skills are less important. Singh et al. (2012) stated that even though these skills, especially entrepreneurship skills, are vastly emphasized in higher learning institutions, it seems less valued by employers in obtaining and keeping a job. A possible justification to this problem is the main focus of developing entrepreneurship skills is to help produce graduates who are able to "create job" rather than "seeking job" (MOE, 2015). On the other hand, the current study has not only helped to conform the importance of all five clusters of employability skills, but also the additional focus in the revised MQF. MQA (2017) noted that ethical competencies which cover ethics and social responsibility. The ethical competencies, which also include personal development, personal values management, ethics and social responsibility, work ethics, professional ethics or professionalism, are being emphasized by employers in almost all selected studies.

CONCLUSION

In short, the current study can be served as a point of reference in understanding employability skills that are valued by employers in Malaysian context. However, its findings should be treated with cautious as it is limited and inadequate to represent all sectors. It is therefore suggested for future studies to be conducted in reviewing employability skills from various industries and with bigger sample size.

Much can be learned from this study. Mainly, in enhancing our education outcomes, especially in tertiary and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, these skills should be highlighted in its curriculum. The concept of an industry-based education as termed by Wellington (1993), emphasizes on identifying the relevant skills required by the industry and designing curriculum that provides technical knowledge and skills development in preparing students for the workforce. Also, with a strong understanding of local industry needs, the ministry and curriculum designer will be able to further investigate on possible working field and its relevant working skills and thus, enhance or introduce them in the education institutions, especially TVET.

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