

EMPLOYER'S PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS POLYTECHNIC'S GRADUATES EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the quality of polytechnics graduates from the perspective of Polytechnic's stake holder, who employed polytechnics' graduates. In polytechnic's, student were exposed with the learning domain such as knowledge, skills and values that was embedded in the curriculum. Specifically, this study to identify the relation between polytechnic's learning domain outcomes with graduate's employability. By identifying the relation, it will prove whether the learning domains provided really suits the employer's requirement in hiring the employee especially the graduates from polytechnics. Besides that, this study also to determine the most required skills need by the employers. The results show that the most important skills required by the employer were practical skills followed by knowledge and lastly soft skills or generic skill attributes. The findings revealed that there is significant with positive relation between practical skills and employability of polytechnic's graduates.

For the overall performance for the quality of polytechnics graduates, it can be concluded that, even the graduates are able to perform their practical skills and knowledge skills which are from the psychomotor and cognitive domain, but they still lack some of the affective domain that consist all the element of soft skills or generic attributes skills such as communication skills and leadership and teamwork skills. The finding also revealed that 74.9% of polytechnic's learning domain outcomes were important to the employability of polytechnic's graduates. Finally, this study highlights suggestion on how to improve the quality of polytechnic's graduates and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: Employer's Perception, Graduates Employability, Employability Skills

1.0 Introduction

Employability skills are one of the important skills that will ensure job opportunity for the graduates. According to Curtis, D and McKenzie (2001), skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic direction known as employability skills. Malaysia needs an education system that is market-driven in order to produce 'work-ready graduates'. The focus towards producing a 'work-ready graduates' should be on graduate attributes geared towards empowering graduates to thrive in the 21st century workplace and to function as productive and responsible citizens. There is still an issue regarding the unemployment amongst the graduates in Malaysia. Malaysia perspectives, the unemployment basically occurred due to global economy crisis. Aini Idris (2009) stated that in order to fulfill manpower needs, it should achieve one of the objectives to produce at least 75% competent graduate at least in their fields within 6 months of their graduation.

Polytechnics offer the development skills course program and prepared them for the workplace by develop general and specific competencies that will be useful to employers or job market. As mention before, the duration for diploma level is 3 years and each student required to undergo industrial training for 6 month before they completed their study. The Industrial training is an added value to their knowledge and experience and it will expose them to the real

working environment. It also will give opportunities for student to relate all the theoretical, practical and soft skills to practice during the industrial training.

Most of employers demand the graduates to be able show their employability skills that known as non-technical skills such as basic skills, thinking skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, system and technology skills, and personal quality where all of this skills is not learn from polytechnics but it comes from them and develop it with help by the polytechnics and it must goes together with their technical skills.

Although having embedded soft skills in the polytechnic curriculum since 2006, together with the guideline for employment such as the way to write correct curriculum vitae, the problems still exist. The soft skills competencies that embedded in the polytechnic curriculum consist of 9 Learning Domain including knowledge and practical skills required by Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). All the soft skills learning domain known as affective skills aims to build individual personality with good communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, social skills and responsibilities, continuous learning and information management skills, management and entrepreneurial skills also to build students with Professionalism, Ethics and Moral and lastly, leadership skills.

1.1 Problem Statement

Produce a pool of competent graduates to fulfill national and international manpower needs with 75% of the graduates employed in their relevant field within six months upon their graduation was one of the objective of Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). But a study has been conduct by MOHE and the results shows that the percentage of employed polytechnic's graduates does not meet the one of the MOHE objectives.

Table 1, data indicates that percentage of polytechnic graduates' employed in 2010 is lower compared to year 2009. Findings from tracer study in 2009 conducted by MOHE shows that 50.6% polytechnic graduates' were able to get work after six month they graduated. While in 2010, it presented that only 48.5% of the graduates from polytechnics are employed after 6 months they graduated. The percentage shows that the objective of 75% employed graduates has not been met.

Table 1: Employment Status of Polytechnic graduates in 2009 and 2010

Alumni Status	2009		2010	
	Number of Polytechnic	(%)	Polytechnic Number	(%)
Employed	12,522	50.6	13,399	48.5
Pursue study	2132	8.6	3,459	12.5
Improve skills	323	1.3	450	1.6
Job Hunt	874	3.5	860	3.1
Unemployed	8898	36.0	9,453	24.2
Total	24,749	100	27,621	100

Employers Fe
faster in globalised market, quality of graduates need to be improved intensively, lack of self-confidence especially in mixing with the business community, lack of soft skills especially communication ability, lack of focus and being choosy and uncertain on jobs offered and job hopping in search of higher pay where experience and skills are still lacking."

It is very crucial for polytechnic to have an overview about their graduates' employability by looking at the relationship between the entire learning domain and employability. It is because polytechnic is the institutions that producing semi-professional graduates and it also helps the government to fill jobs requiring semi-professional workers to the nation. Therefore, it will draw a basic picture of the role of polytechnics in developing the nation.

1.3 Research Objectives

There are three objectives designed for this study, which are:

- i. To identify the most significant relationship between polytechnics learning domain and employability.
- ii. To identify employer's perception towards quality of polytechnic's graduates.
- iii. To determine the most importance skills required by employers from polytechnic graduates.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Employer's Perception

According to Cotton (2005) identify that based on Employer's perception they looking for graduates that have employability skills such as reading, basic arithmetic and other basic skills; problem solving, decision making and other higher order thinking skills; dependability, positive attitude, cooperativeness and other affective skills and traits where all the skills are considered essential to job performance. In every organization, employers will be careful to select individuals to be part of them where with high demand and requirement from organization will give difficulties for graduates in getting employed so that will be issues about unemployed among graduates. The study done by Mason (2009) stated about management's perception on employability is refer to work-readiness where possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after beginning employment.

Research by Forrier & Sels (2003) found that the employer's approaches to promote employability with focus on company orientation, commitment and interpersonal skills that will emphasize individual effort and dedication over technical training. The demand of employers on these forms of generic training showed that the priority of employability only reflects an effort to secure employee commitment in the face of uncertain conditions of contract, rather than a genuine interest in addressing high level skills. This is means when an employer hired for permanent position with long period of service is far more likely to be provided with opportunities to improve their employability than contract or temporary workers.

The study done by Harvey (2001) said, most organizations have expectations of every fresh graduate that enter job market and already possessed with such skills since they do not have the leisure time and luxury resource to send them for training at professional instruction centers. Here, employability skills are not job specific and part of the work skills which is as important as technical skills that should be acquired by everybody in an organization. The technical skills or we call it as hard skills is learn from and emphasize through programs of study in institutions that was almost not equipped with personal qualities and soft skills and so that become to our knowledge that a perfect blend of personal qualities, soft skills and hard skills will definitely contribute to enhancing graduate employability.

2.2 Employability Skills

Employability skills are often debate with various interpretations which biased towards stating that employability skill is a preparation for the graduates to successfully get a job and to develop in their career. But from the point of view of human capital theory through social psychology perspective, "employability" is a job, but more towards the ability to do work. The main goal is the critical ability, reflective to convince and upgrade an individual with the skill other than his special or technical skill.

McQuaid & Lindsay (2005) found employability has increasingly important in most developed countries because it assists graduates to function effectively in today's era of globalization and the challenging world ahead. According to Buck and Barrick (1987) Employability skills are the attributes of employees, other than technical skills competence, that make them asset to the employer. These employability skills include reading, basic arithmetic and other basic skills; problem solving, decision making, and other high-order thinking skills; and dependability, a positive attitude cooperativeness, and other affective skills and traits.

The study done by Mohamed Rashid (2005) in his research on polytechnic graduates found that about 50.5% technical graduates of Malaysian Polytechnics are jobless for almost nine months of the year because of lack employability skills. He found that these graduates are also weak in communication, writing and computer skills. Another study by Kathleen (2005), in her research on technical graduates in America, had found that employers are not satisfied with the job applicants from graduates, not because they do not have enough technical skills or knowledge, but because they have not enough non-technical skills.

2.3 Graduates Employability

According to Purcell & Elias (2002) employability of university graduates is dependent upon the subject are studied and their chosen field of employment that is happened in Indonesia. The curriculum in institutions set up does not explicitly these non-technical skills, but is expected of every student to gain it informally. Finding solutions to the employability gap by organizing workshop or training for imparting like employability skills is a typical example of added on approach, rather than integrating with educational content. Harvey (2000) also support that they role also to train students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities also empower them as lifelong critical and reflective learners. In this situation, universities must know and understand the employer's demand so that the graduates will present with the required qualities. Some studies that conduct by Cox & King (2006), Hegarty & Johnston (2008) propose that universities should get employers involved in the design, delivery and assessment of programs and universities need to show that their programs are comply with requirements for benchmarking, professional and statutory bodies, level descriptors and academic reviews.

2.4 Early Employment Problems Of Graduates

Courtis and Zaid (2002) identified six major early employment problems for Australia accounting graduates: application of theoretical studies, comprehension of responsibilities, working in a team, communication with others, personal and report writing. Most problems arise due to expectation gap between employee and employers. One of the suggested reasons for problem is the lack of coordination between tertiary institutions and employers.

According to Wong and Hamali (2006) examined the main issues on graduate employment in Malaysia using empirical evidence obtained from annual reports published by various government ministries as well as a tracer study conducted in 2002 on Diploma in Banking graduates from MARA University Technology, Sarawak. The tracer study intended to assess the performance of a group of young working graduates by obtaining their feedback regarding the relevancy of subjects offered by the programs in university. The findings showed that there was a discrepancy between graduate's skills and the requirements of job market. Though the graduates were trained to take up mid level management positions, and more than 40% of the respondents were in junior administrators or lower position.

Referred to Labor Force Survey (2005), 63,000 graduates were unemployed in Malaysia. Among the unemployed graduates, the highest number of unemployment is

business graduates. There are about 17,800 business graduates have difficulties in finding employment. The executive director of the Malaysian Employers Federation, Shamsuddin Bardan (The Malay Mail, 2007) pointed out that graduates lack of communication and social skills, and the poor command of English are main reasons of graduates unemployment.

2.5 Generic Attributes

Knoblauch and German (1989) outlined few most highly sought after attributes by employers for Cornell University Applied Economics and Business Management graduates. The attributes were enthusiasm, self-starting ability, general ability, working with others, oral communication and preparedness for the job. Sparks and Bradley (1994) also discovered that employers from hospitality industry places greater emphasis upon the graduates' practical skills, level of commitment and ability to deliver high levels of service. They have conducted survey on 197 hotels managers working in hotels comprising 75 rooms or more in Australia.

Crebert et al (2004) presented the findings of Griffith Graduate Project. Under this project, graduates were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the contributions the learning contexts of university, work placement and post-graduation employment made to the development of their generic skills. It was found that graduates recognized the university contribution towards generic skills development and they valued the experience of job placement and subsequently in employment. The findings identified the importance of teamwork, being given responsibility and collaborative learning as main factors for developing generic skills. Graduate labor market is becoming increasingly diverse and fragmented through changes in the design and structures of jobs. Jobs are becoming more demanding through work intensification practices such as multi-skilling, using of information technology and other employability skills such as social, communication and problem-solving skills (CSU 2000).

Bennett et al (1999) stated that employers were looking for manpower that has the ability to think, learn and adapt. All these are attributes that form the generic core competencies. If higher education is to meet the needs of the economy and the individual, it must seek actively to develop these generic core competencies.

3.0 Methodology

For this study, convenience sampling under non-probability sampling was chosen as the sampling technique. This method was chosen because the respondents are accessible, easy to measure and cooperative. Since this study focused on the employer that registered in polytechnic alumni tracer study all over Malaysia, therefore the respondents' participation was based on voluntary basis. The respondents were asked on their readiness to participate in the study by answering the questionnaire. The questionnaire then was collected once the respondents had completed answering all the questions.

Roscoe (1975) stated sample sizes larger than 30 and less than 500 are appropriate for most research. In this study the sample that been used in this study was 130 respondents of employer that registered in polytechnic alumni tracer study and they are currently employed polytechnic graduates as their employee. This sample size was most cost efficient and time feasible for the researcher. In this study, a survey of questionnaire is used for collection of primary data. The questionnaire was distributed through email.

3.1 Instrumentation

The structured questionnaires were being used to gather data in order to complete this survey. The questionnaire consists of closes-ended question also called as multiple choice questions whereby respondents may be able to select the best answer that suited those most. The questionnaire consists of 3 sections which are arranged according to the

variables in this study. SECTION A captures the employer's demographic, SECTION B is the employer's perception towards quality of polytechnic's graduates and SECTION C is the perception of polytechnic graduate's employability.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Table 2: Reliability Results

Section	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha (N=130)
Dependent Variable (Section C) Perception of Graduates Employability skills	3	0.677
Independent Variables (Section B)		
LD1 Knowledge	3	0.704
LD2 Practical Skills	3	0.730
LD3 Communication Skills	3	0.777
LD4 Critical Thinking And Problem Solving Skills	4	0.742
LD5 Social Skills And Responsibility	3	0.755
LD6 Continuous Learning And Information Management Skills	3	0.734
LD7 Management And Entrepreneurial Skills	4	0.674
LD8 Professionalism, Ethics And Moral Skills	4	0.840
LD9 Leadership And Teamwork Skills	3	0.623

Based from table 2, it was found that for section C, it show Cronbach Alpha 0.677. Even it was below 0.7 but the dependent variables was important to the we can conclude that of Section B and C are more than 0.6. Whereas, 0.8 above and are considered 'good', while 0.7 above which means this section is only considered to be 'acceptable' in this research. Since the reliability coefficients of all 2 sections are more than 0.6, therefore this indicates that the variables of this study are considered to be accepted.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

There are 9 learning domain that will influence employer's perceptions towards the quality and employability of polytechnic graduates. Employability (consist of knowledge, technical competence and soft skills also known as generic attributes skills) : 9 learning domain (consist of Knowledge, Practical Skills, Communication Skills, Critical Thinking And Problem Solving Skills, Social Skills And Responsibility, Continuous Learning And Information Management Skills, Management And Entrepreneurial Skills, Professionalism, Ethics And Moral Skills, and Leadership And Teamwork Skills. To analyze all these 9 factors and its dependent variable, descriptive statistic has been used to show the score of mean value. According to Malhotra et al. (2002), the score mean value was interpreted using the Score Mean Level introduced by Malhotra.

Mean Value	Level
1.00 – 2.33	Lower
2.34 – 3.67	Medium
3.68 – 5.00	Higher

Source: Malhotra et al. (2002)

The overall results, the employer's perceptions towards the quality of polytechnics graduates are shown in below table.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on the Overall Employer's Perception Towards the Quality of Polytechnics Graduates

Learning Domain	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Knowledge	130	3.00	4.33	3.6923	.43849
Practical	130	3.00	4.33	3.7128	.45420
Communication	130	2.67	4.00	3.3744	.43534
Critical Thinking and Problem Solving	130	2.75	4.25	3.3846	.50208
Social Skills and Responsibility	130	3.00	4.33	3.6897	.45879
Continuous Learning and Management Information Skills	130	3.00	4.33	3.6821	.45059
Management and Entrepreneurial Skills	130	2.75	4.00	3.4615	.35962
Professionalism	130	3.00	4.75	3.5173	.59892
Leadership Skills	130	2.67	4.33	3.5333	.44042

As conclusion, from the findings it shows that for the range of Mean between 3.7120 and 3.6821, for the first place employer's feel that the polytechnics graduates have high Practical skills, second was Knowledge, third was Social skills and Responsibility and fourth place was Continuous Learning and Management Information skills. With Mean 3.5333 and 3.5173, it shows that the Leadership and Teamwork skill and also Professionalism, Ethics and Moral were at middle rank level. Meanwhile, Management and Entrepreneurial skills, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving skills and lastly Communication skills were rank at low level with range of Mean between 3.4615 and 3.3744. Which mean, from the perception of the employers, the communication skills shows the lowest level skills for polytechnics graduates.

We can conclude that, even the graduates are able to perform their practical skills and knowledge skills which are from the psychomotor and cognitive domain, but they still lack some of the affective domain that consist all the element of soft skills or generic attributes skills such as communication skills and leadership and teamwork skills.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.046	.268		3.900	.000
Knowledge	.368	.156	.878	2.358	.020
Practical	.620	.173	.659	3.585	.000
Communication	-.113	.249	-.115	-.454	.651
Critical Thinking	-.054	.115	-.063	-.466	.642
Social	.192	.33	.206	.824	.412
Continuous Learning	-.356	.157	-.375	-2.261	.026
Management	.053	.305	.044	.172	.863
Professionalism	-.019	.078	.026	-.242	.809
Leadership	.044	.151	.046	.294	.770

Table 5: Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.865a	.749	.730	.22201

Table 4 shows the result of multiple linear regression analysis of Hypotheses 1, Hypotheses 2, Hypotheses 3 Hypotheses 4, Hypotheses 5, Hypotheses 6, Hypotheses 7, Hypotheses 8 and Hypotheses 9. From the analysis, it shows that the p-values for Practical skills are less than 0.05. Its Beta values were the highest with 0.659 and t-value was 3.585. We can conclude that the Practical skills have significant relationship with the employability. Which mean the large and positive relationship tells that the graduates who have high quality in Practical skills also have high level of employability or being employed.

The Beta values for Knowledge Skills were 0.378 and t-values were 2.358 with significance of 0.020. Knowledge skills shows that it has significant relationship with employability with the p-values is less than 0.05. Whereas for Continuous Learning and Information Management Skills, even it shows negative Beta coefficient -3.75 and p-value were -2.261 but the relationship is still significant with 0.026.

For others independent variables, there is no relationship between the learning domain and employability. In general, when the regression coefficient is negative and this implies that an increase on the independent variables will lead to a decrease of dependent variables. The negative p-value that is more than 0.05 also indicates the negative relationship. The positive p-values less than 0.05 represent positive relationship between variables and outcome. Therefore, in this study we can conclude that only Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 6 are accepted.

From Table 5, the R² value of 0.749 (this value is about equal to adjusted R² if the sample is large) implies that the 9 independent variables affect the employability of polytechnic graduates at 74.9%. Which mean, 74.9% the 9 learning domain (knowledge, practical skills, communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, social skills and responsibility, continuous learning and information management skills, management and entrepreneurial skills, professionalism, ethics and moral and lastly leadership and teamwork skills) was important to the employability of polytechnic's graduates. As the conclusion, the result shows that only practical skills, knowledge factor and continuous learning and information management skills factors has significant relationship with the employability of polytechnic's graduates. The employers also identify that by having in-depth practical competencies will make the graduates more employable.

4.4 Review of Hypothesis Testing

The analysis supported by the hypothesis, there was a relation between learning domain which consist of knowledge, practical skills, communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, social skills and responsibility, continuous learning and information management skills, management and entrepreneurial skills, Professionalism, ethics and moral lastly leadership skills towards employability. The result shows that the levels of employer's perception towards the quality of polytechnics graduates are high. Besides that, it also can proved by looking to the regression result where some variables of learning domain such as knowledge, practical skills and continuous learning and management information skills are very significant with employability. Supported by the descriptive result of the employer's perception towards the most required employability skills, it shows that Technical competence is mostly being required by the employers in graduate's employability. The mean was 3.9923 and the standard deviation was 0.67624 and the score was higher among knowledge and generic attributes skills.

Table 6: Hypothesis Finding Review

No	Hypothesis	Findings
H1	There is significant relationship between knowledge and employability.	Accepted
H2	There is significant relationship between practical skills and employability.	Accepted
H3	There is significant relationship between communication skills and employability.	Rejected
H4	There is significant relationship between critical thinking and problem solving skills and employability.	Rejected
H5	There is significant between relationship social skills and responsibility, and employability.	Rejected
H6	There is significant relationship between continuous learning and information management skills and employability.	Accepted
H7	There is significant relationship between management and entrepreneurial skills and employability.	Rejected
H8	There is significant relationship between professionalism, ethics and moral skills and employability.	Rejected
H9	There is significant relationship between leadership and teamwork skills and employability.	Rejected

Overall the results based on table 6 indicated that only three hypothesis has been accepted out of nine hypotheses been tested.

5.0 Conclusion

Nowadays, employability has becomes major problems, where graduates enables to show their aptitude in such of soft skills. Employability has increasingly important in most developed countries because it assist graduates to function effectively and efficiently in this challenging world and today's era of globalization. Based on the research findings above, it was found that there is a relation exists between polytechnic's learning domains towards the employability of polytechnics graduates. In general, the graduate's quality is very important to the employers because graduates should be able to show their competencies in order to get hired by the employers. The learning domain that are been embedded in polytechnic's curriculum are knowledge in related field, in depth of practical skills and also soft skills such as communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, social skills and responsibility, continuous learning and information management skills, management and entrepreneurial skills, Professionalism, ethics and moral lastly leadership and teamwork skills. The employers desired the capability of graduates to apply their knowledge that they gain from their study to the current situation in the workplace. This mean, the graduates are able to provide information and resources in performing the task given. The employers also want employ graduates who have in-depth technical competence. The graduates should have the multi-tasking skills in order to achieve the employers target and also competent in performing job. And the important thing is the graduates not only focus on knowledge and practical skills but should have focus in preparing themselves with soft skills before enter the working environment.

Meanwhile as stated by SCANS (1991), someone who could adapt through the use of creative thinking and problems solving skills, can possessed effective personal management skills, had interpersonal negotiating and teamwork skills that made them effective work group member, and could influence other to act through leadership skills and had individual responsibility, self management and integrity. As final conclusion, the polytechnic's graduates should prepared themselves for the workplace and working environment by developing the general and specific competencies that will be useful to employer or job market. Their ability in fulfil the employer's requirement will make them marketable and being employed after their graduation from polytechnics.

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