

## EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYERS ON COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG FRESH GRADUATES

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### ABSTRACT

*Every employer wants their newly hired employees to possess vital employability skills that can enhance the performance and growth of their organisations. Employers rely on universities to provide university graduates to have been trained adequately before entering the workforce. Adequate employability skills possessed by prospective employees will certainly satisfy employers' expectations. In the competitive 21<sup>st</sup> century, one tangible soft skill deems essential is communication skills. They prefer graduates who possess great soft and communication skills that can enhance their organisations' growth and performance. Effective communication is considered one of the vital skills that most employers look for in their potential new employees to possess. How marketable graduates (prospective employees) is and how soon they could be hired successfully depends on the types of programmes, tasks and activities and skills they have acquired during their university years. This exploratory research paper reports findings based on the employers' perceptions towards graduates whom they hired in their organisations. Data obtained from interviews with 3 employers from private company, semi-government and government bodies indicate some concern over the kind and the amount of communication skills our fresh graduates possess and exhibit. From these 3 employers, it was discovered that most fresh graduates lack negotiation skills and proper communication skills which include presentation skills and interviewing. Most fresh*

*graduates lack certain social communication skills such as not being diplomatic. These employers suggest the needs for fresh graduates to be trained in authentic situations by giving them real life simulations. The training programmes designed need to allow them to showcase and display their abilities and skills from the various learning activities taught in Malaysian universities and at the same time encourage many community service responsibility (CSR) activities to inculcate not only problem-solving skills but also communication skills. It is also suggested that universities need to keep upgrading their communication programmes in order to produce employable graduates with better chances of being hired successfully by work markets.*

**Keywords:** *employability, fresh graduates, negotiation skills, problem solving skills, CSR*

## INTRODUCTION

Human capital development is often referred to as one of the identified critical areas in the country's development agenda under the Ninth Malaysia Plan which runs from 2006 to 2010 (The Economic Planning Unit, 2006). By this, it also means that the labour's potential has to be nurtured and groomed to fulfil the urgent need of the Malaysian development plan. It is thus apparent that one of the aims of universities is to produce potential employees (Robinson and Garton, 2008) who could compete with other employees and furnish the labour market by 2020. Research shows that 86% of employers consider good communication skills to be important, yet many employers are dissatisfied that graduates can express themselves (Archer & Davison, 2008). A number of reports issued by employers (Zaharim, Yusoff & Omar, 2009; Zaharim, Yusoff, Omar & Basri 2010; Ismail, Yusoff & Lai Wei Sieng, 2011) have urged universities to specifically work on making and undertaking more explicit efforts to develop the 'key' 'core', 'transferable', 'soft' and 'generic skills' as demanded by various types of employment. In any organisations, it is expected that each employee has certain employability skills to increase the performance of their organisations or companies. Their employers expect their employees to possess good communication skills to manage and satisfy their clients. Being able to communicate

well becomes a benchmarking parameter for succeeding well in most organisations.

The challenges in competing in the world of employability in this decade has proven to be quite significant to both higher learning institutions and its graduates (Shafie & Nayan, 2010). Even if the varsity students are exposed to a variety of courses, course contents covered during their undergraduate studies are not suffice as employers are more demanding now in the types of quality employees and the kinds of skills these graduates are required before being employed in the respective industries. As the world market becomes more globalized and internationalized, graduates are faced with intense competitions to enter the labour market, compelling them to be equipped with more skills than ever in ensuring that they are ready to be employed. Having good degrees does not guarantee employment as organisations are demanding a variety of employability skills. Thus, employees must ensure that they possess other skills besides having certificates/diplomas that can impress their employers when dealing with their clients or customers.

The existence of more than 38 Malaysian public and private universities and more than 500 university colleges operating using both local and overseas license have not made it any easier for fresh graduates to secure steady and permanent employment to match their academic qualifications. Apart from that, the fact that employers seem to demand their potential employees to have certain skills and competencies and at the same time having excellent academic results have made unemployment rate to increase at an alarming rate. Despite the statistics from the Department of Statistics (DoS) indicating a low unemployment rate of 3.3% (Sim, 2013), the number of unemployed graduates from Malaysian higher learning institutions remain to be high. Figure from the Malaysian Higher Education Ministry, Malaysian higher learning institutions produced approximately 184 581 graduates in 2011 but only 24.6% or 44 931 did not manage to find a job after six months of graduating. Estimating from this figure, it is anticipated that 140 000 new graduates will enter employment market in 2012 and 2013 (Edree, 2011). If this trend continues, this figure seems to suggest that each year there will be a surplus of 70 000 fresh graduates not being able to obtain employment, by the year

2000, the estimated number will be half a million or around 560 000 graduates.

With the increasing number of graduates produced annually by Malaysian universities, it becomes even more crucial to explore if the university itself has fully prepared its graduates adding more market values to them. The Ministry of Education and its agencies such as Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) require public and private universities to include certain employable skills in order to reduce the rate of unemployment. The true measure of what these graduates are worth in terms of employability mostly depends on who are hiring them, in other words the employers as they would assess these graduates based on the nature of the industry or work, organizational culture amongst others. In other words, the gap between employers' perceptions and the types of graduates they employ must be minimized and there should be an almost perfect match between their expectations and the skills and competencies of these graduates.

Figure from The Star newspaper on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 which looked at randomly selected 139 recruitment advertisements from January to March 2014 illustrated that soft skills to be most essential with communication as the highest with 79.8% and people's skills to be 65.5%. An employability survey undertaken by Bar Council in 2012 showed that apart from fluency in both languages, English and Bahasa Malaysia, communication skills are also considered to be important. From the many listed skills and competencies, communication skills and attitudes seem to fare among the most required for employers. It is also a common perceived notion that most graduates, especially those from local universities lack the appropriate communication skills. There is also a limited published research on the perceptions, expectations of the skills that employers desire of fresh graduates entering the workforce. It is therefore the interest of this paper to find the perspectives from employers since literature repeatedly mentioned that most graduates lack proper communication skills especially when interacting with fellow colleagues and customers.

This paper explores the perceptions of three employers in Kubang Pasu district in Kedah on the communication skills exhibited among

fresh graduates of a public university. Their perceptions focus on the graduates employed by three different sectors; namely, government, semi-government and private. Based on the series of interviews conducted, it was determined the actual level of communications skills of the fresh graduates they employed, and the different communication skills they have mastered and the ones they strongly needed to improve were identified.

### **Employability Skills**

There are various employability skills and competencies that employers often required such as communications, technical and numerical. According to the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, Malaysian industries are focused on a specific set of skills that graduates must possess when applying for a job. Their skill set is divided into two categories comprising hard or technical skills and soft skills, also known as non-technical skills. Firstly, employability skills are defined as skills for not only obtaining and maintaining jobs but also performing well at workplace. These are the basics of the required skills and they can be divided into three: Academic Skills, Higher Order Thinking Skills (also known as HOTs) and lastly Personal Qualities (Robinson, 2000). Zinser (2003) on the other hand, defines employability skills as readiness and preparations which include aspects of problem solving, communication and interpersonal skills, and teamwork. Bush and Barrick (1987) categorize employability skills and competencies by areas such as personal values, problem-solving and decision-making skills, relations with other people, communication skills, task related skills, maturity, health and safety habits and commitment to job. This definition is more comprehensive as they are inclusive of personal traits and attributes. Another aspect of employability skills and competencies offered by Shafie & Nayan (2010) list skills such as problem solving, decision making, interpersonal skills, communication skills, task related skills amongst others that would enable graduates to secure employability with the respective potential employers. Among the skills that are commonly cited in studies, communication skills to fare as the highest necessary skill demanded by employers.

## **Communication Skills**

Effective communication in the workplace is key to success in organization. Communication is needed to increase efficiency and to improve quality. Communication can be defined as exchanging information between individuals through verbal and non-verbal methods to receive the information (Barret, 2006). Seiler & Beall (2005) has also defined communication as sharing and giving meaning occurring at the same time through symbolic interactions. Among the soft skills, communication skill was received more attention in the context of employability. Communication skills, including the ability to problem solve, work in teams, and adapt to various audiences, are critical in today's workplace (Levy & Murnane, 2004). Communication skills are defined as skills of listening and expressing oneself in clear, positive manner in both written and oral medium. The set of skills encompassing communication skills are other soft skills such as listening, open-mindedness, empathy and confidence which are deemed as must have skills for fresh graduates. However, the list for communication skills also differ from one scholar to another. For instance, the website the balance careers list communication skills as listening, non-verbal communication, clarity and concision, friendliness, confidence, empathy, open-mindedness, respect, giving feedback and picking the right medium as their top ten communication skills. Most literature identified communication skills as consisting both written and oral.

## **Employers Perceptions on Communication Skills**

Nurita, Shaharudin and Ainon (2004) emphasize that employers nowadays look for graduates who are well balanced in both their academic achievement and possess 'soft skills' such as communication, problem solving, interpersonal and the ability to be flexible. In a report by the Malaysian government on fresh graduates discovered that the majority who could not secure employment were due to them being inexperienced, having poor English and communication skills (Malaysiakini, 2005). Past research also reveal that most employers seek certain skills, look for certain attitudes that they characterize as ones that would fit their company and industry profiles. This could also mean that they have certain criteria that illustrate them as being

effective team members. The very reason of this is one that obtaining a certain type of graduates will reduce on the number and types of trainings later on they have to organize which could be translated into spending less money and time on training their personnel.

Research on students' employability anonymously agreed that fresh graduates communication skills will have to be adequate for them to function and perform their duties and tasks well at workplaces. This perception is due to the fact that certain soft skills are observed to be needed at workplace. Such skills are interactions, negotiations, interpersonal skills and both written and oral communication ways of communicating with colleagues and clients are regarded as vital since it reflects much of the image and reputation of the organizations and industries where these graduates work.

### **Employers Expectations on Communication Skills**

In a survey by the Newspaper, The Star for the period of January to March 2014, 139 recruitment advertisements stated that the two soft skills that are considered as the most vital, sought after and valued well by employers are the communication and people's skills. In terms of language skills, it is a must requirement in almost all advertisements citing English Language and Bahasa Malaysia being the first language or second. Another survey by the Malaysia Bar Council illustrated the importance of being fluent in English and possessing the necessary communication skills.

The study conducted by Md Yusof and Masdinah, (2018) reveals that communication skills especially the English language speaking skill is one of the criteria used to select fresh graduates for employment. This is supported by the findings in Zaharim *et al.* (2009) investigating the employers' expectations towards engineering graduates who found that the communication ability is one of the skills needed to get hired. According to Marlina Ali and Shaharom (2006), poor communication skills of the fresh graduates may become threats to their employability.

### **Reality of Fresh Graduates Communication Skills**

It is important for varsity students to have good communication so as to secure employment after graduation. They need to master the

communication skills in order to succeed in their career growth. In university programmes, students are exposed to communication courses and they are expected to realise the six important elements in speech communication process: the sender, recipient, message, channel, feedback and interference (Lucas, 2015). According to the Ministry of Education (2006), communication skills are components of generic skills that have been identified as a focus at the universities. Furthermore, as pointed out by Zanaton et al. (2012), the university's role in producing graduates in various fields to fulfill the market needs does not only focus on academic achievement, but also on generic skills or "soft skills" required for them to compete in the global market " (p. 1). They stress that "communication skills are important especially during the process of seeking job (p. 71). They said that it is also vital that university students be given time to develop their communication skills in order to get better jobs after their formal study (Ihmeideh, Ahmad & Dababneh, 2010) and Cleland, Foster & Moffat, 2005).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

Since this is an exploratory study, the chosen sampling was small and instruments were designed so as to answer questions specifically pertaining to communication skills needed for employability. The primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews with three employers from various industries in Kubang Pasu area which is expected to employ the biggest number of graduates from the nearby local university. However, before the interviews, the three employers were requested to fill in a short and simple questionnaire of their expectations and what the graduates actually acquired.

The three employers were from government sector, semi-government sector and private industry. They were purposely approached and chosen to fulfil the three categories that represent employment market in Malaysia. They were also selected based on their position and job description in their respective organisations, as suggested by Merriam (2009). In this study, they are known as Adli (government), Nadira (semi-government) and Wafa (private).



## **Instruments**

### ***Questionnaire***

The objective of distributing the questionnaire to the employers before the semi-structured interview sessions was to gauge the perceptions, expectations and the observable traits and communication skills exhibited by fresh graduates at their industries. The questionnaire also asked of the employers' background and their experience in the industry. In the questionnaire, the employers state the extent of their expectations by giving score starting from 1 as being not necessarily or important to 5 being extremely needed skill that a graduate must possess. Besides the expectation column, employers would again state scores of the graduates' actual level of communication skills.

### ***Semi-structured interview***

There were eleven semi-structured questions constructed to gauge on employers' expectations and what were exhibited by the graduates at the workplace. The questions were centred on the kinds of graduates they felt would aptly fit into their company's profiles. Given the different industries the employers came from, the semi-structured questions were used as guide to mine an even deeper understanding on the perceptions of employers on the communication skills of the graduates.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Based on the questionnaire and interview responses, the findings seem to correspond positively to each instrument, illustrating that in general, they correlate with their initial responses and the later. The followings are their findings.

### **Employers Perceptions and Expectations**

From the filled questionnaire done by the three employers, all unanimously agree that communication skills ranked the highest as the most important soft skills that is vital for all fresh graduates. From the listed communication skills, employers were asked to rank

them in accordance to the most important to the least important in relation to the needs and requirements of their industries. Upon interviewing sessions with the participants, it is found that the kinds of communication skills that are required go further than the ones being commonly taught at university levels.

What this suggests is the graduates' communications skills must be of another level, meaning it must be incredibly impressive or at least of a certain standard. With the world moving into being a more flexible and adaptable workforce, it places communication skill as an essential soft-skill that illustrates these fresh graduates as being effective team member that is individually responsible with high integrity.

*The newbies are often regarded as those who have poor communication skills. They display lower language proficiency especially in their chosen words during presentations, discussions and meetings and in emails, often, they made too many grammatical mistakes that we could not simply overlook. These need to be addressed and at times, they are costly since they could not work independently and must be monitored at all times (Nadira).*

Very often, graduates are required to write emails in which attachments are enclosed. One of the matters being highlighted is the inappropriateness of their greetings in emails, as mentioned by one of the participants:

*Being in the semi-government, it is an utmost importance that these fresh graduates must know how to address their senior and those holding positions. It is not so bad when they see or meet us face to face, for instance in the hallways, but in writing, they seem to lack this (Nadira).*

This was also supported by another participant who works in the government sector as he mentioned that he repeatedly has to remind and correct the newly recruited employees:

*Sometimes it gets frustrating as it is time consuming. It is not enough for me to show it to them once, but usually it is a few*

*times. This is basic stuff. They should know it even without us telling them. I don't know if they should learn this at university or if someone at the university has to tell them the right way to do things (Adli).*

The perceptions that most employers often have of these fresh graduates are that they are skillful enough as they are often portrayed as the generations who are competent enough in skills and competencies. This is due to the fact that most graduates nowadays are deemed to be academically excellent since they score well in their school's national exams before enrolling in their chosen universities. This was also the comment put forward by the employees from both the semi-government and government companies.

*These fresh graduates hired by XXX (name of the semi-government company) are supposedly good students but I feel that they are only good at their studies. I feel that they do not know anything about other things but how to score in their courses (Nadira).*

Meanwhile, the government employee made a comparison between his generation with the new employees and mentioned the following:

*The kids nowadays, they are good at complaining and felt that they have the right to everything. However, little that they realize that when they work, there are bosses and bosses to their bosses. They may be smart, but when it comes to respecting and learning from the ones senior to them, they are bad (Adli).*

## **Reality**

In many aspects, the expectations of employees do not meet the employability skills and competencies of the fresh graduates. One of the areas that was mentioned by all three employers are the language that was used in meetings, presentations and emails. Very often, these fresh graduates would use inappropriate language instead of the formal one as required in formal working environment.

In other instance, fresh graduates do not seem to show competencies and confidence in using the English language. This is often shown

during presentations and in their written reports. Upon interviews with all three of them, they claimed that very often, the language used has to be corrected and edited which was time consuming as reports needed to be rechecked and rewritten before submitting to the higher authority. This is illustrated by the semi-government official who mentioned:

*The fresh graduates tend to use informal language. On top of that, their spelling and grammar mistakes are atrocious and glaring enough that they need to be corrected. I sometimes spend so much time correcting and editing their work that it gets frustrating (Nadira).*

The same was echoed by another employer of a private firm who complained of the following:

*With these fresh graduates, it is quite difficult to correct them. They think highly of themselves although there are many instances where they use informal language during presentations and meetings. The same happens in their emails and reports. It makes me wonder if they have actually written emails and prepared reports prior to them entering employment (Wafa).*

Another remark made by two of the employers are on the graduate disability to be respectful, mindfulness and open-mindedness towards others. This was exhibited especially during meetings, discussions with not only with their fellow colleagues, but also at time with clients. Some of the discussions and negotiations could lead to dispute and misunderstanding and to some extent being rude to others:

*There are times during meetings and discussions where I have to step in to stop my colleagues from getting into heated argument. Most of the times it is only due to a small misunderstanding. Youngsters nowadays always talked back whenever we give them instructions. They felt we are bullying them when in fact we are training them to do the work (Wafa).*

This is supported by another employer from the government sector:

*Very often, these new graduates need to be taught and talked to on simple things such as how to do discussions, how to agree and disagree even. I remember having to tell them how to express their opinions without being disrespectful towards others. For us, this is common sense. But this is often not the case with these new youngsters (Nadira).*

In another aspect, those from local graduates are often regarded as having the poorest command of English language and often perform the worst in job interviews. They are also regarded as being the less proactive, and by implication, less able to think creatively and also being the less involved in interactions with colleagues.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings from this mini explorative study seems to suggest that although there are some communication skills that can be acquired whilst working, there are still some vital ones that need to be improved so that when the fresh graduates leave their universities, they will be more prepared. As discovered in the study, the employers expect that the graduates be equipped with the right attitude and appropriate communicative abilities, including acceptable language proficiency as these are deemed essential for the functioning of the organisation. Zanaton et al. (2012) state that universities need “to develop and horn their communication skills that are essential towards their future career development” (p. 75). Varsity students need to understand communication situations in the real world and learn to develop their communication skills before venturing into the real world of work. It is therefore vital for university curriculum to include training in skills that will enable the students to function and perform their duties and tasks well at workplaces. Such skills include appropriate interactions, negotiations, interpersonal skills and both written and oral communication ways of communicating with colleagues and clients. These are indeed important must-haves as they reflect much of the image and reputation of the organizations and industries where these graduates work. The curriculum should therefore provide rooms for university lecturers to “create as many learning activities as possible to stimulate and provide opportunities

for students to practice and hone their communication skills” (Zanaton et al., 2012, p. 75). Further, the curriculum should be extensive enough to allow for the university students to develop their communication skills over time and across disciplines for the skills to become second nature. The university’s role in producing graduates in various fields should not only focus on academic achievement, but also on soft skills, such as communication skills. It is hoped that universities move to continuously reform and redesign their programmes to suit with the demands of the 21st century global market needs.

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