

# Employability Awareness among Malaysian Undergraduates

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## Abstract

Changes are norms at workplaces. As a result, globalization and development of technology demand employees to be highly-skilled. Graduates find it difficult to seek employment upon graduation as they are lack of employability skills. Thus the need to establish employability skills among university undergraduates is imperative. This study is conducted in order to determine whether employability skills can be enhanced through studying English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) among undergraduates in Malaysia. In addition, it investigates whether undergraduates are able to identify attributes employers seek. The results of this study have useful pedagogical implications for teaching of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) as the data obtained may be used to prepare teaching materials in order to enhance undergraduates' employability skills.

**Keywords:** Attributes, Employability skills, Attributes, English for occupational purposes, Employability

## 1. Introduction

What are employability skills? Employability skills are those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job and they can be divided into three categories: Basic Academic Skills, Higher-Order Thinking Skills and Personal Qualities (Robinson, 2000). Employability skills are also known as job readiness skills. The term also refers to the skills required to acquire and retain a job and recent usage of the term is often used to describe the preparation or foundation skills upon which a person must build job-specific skills for example preparing a sales-report (Saterfiel & Mclarty, 1995). As for Zinser (2003), career and employability skills include areas such as managing resources, communication and interpersonal skills, team work and problem-solving and acquiring and retaining a job. Employability skills can also be defined as a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that makes individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (ESECT, 2004). Further definition of employability skills' competencies was provided by Bush and Barrick (1987). Employability skills were categorized by the following competency areas: 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. Generally, employability skills are needed by students to prepare themselves to meet the needs of many different occupations upon graduation.

Employers today are concerned about finding good workers who not only have basic academic skills like reading, writing, science, mathematics, oral communication and listening, but also higher order thinking skills like learning, reasoning, thinking creatively, decision making and problem solving. Besides, they are also looking for employees that have personal qualities that among all include responsibility, self-confidence, self-control, social skill, honest, have integrity, adaptable and flexible, team spirit, punctual and efficient, self-directed, good work attitude, well-groomed, cooperative, self-motivated and self-management. However, most of our graduates are not aware of this current phenomenon whereby they sometimes don't see the connection on what they do in class with the real job world that they will venture into later. Therefore, it is the duty of the lecturers to ensure that these students are well-equipped with employability skills in order to further succeed in their job field later upon their graduation.

## 2. Literature Review

To keep pace with global competition, fresh graduates need to adapt to the new business environment and workplace demands. The key element to enable graduates to keep up with those demands seems to be the employability skills and traits that are imparted during tertiary education. It has also become a common belief in

industry that higher education institutions should equip graduates with the proper skills necessary to achieve success in the workplace (Robinson & Garton, 2007).

Based on the research done to students at a technical training institute in Malaysia, Ab. Rahim & Ivan (2007) find out that the employability skills should not be taught since students acquire them on their own during training and education. Their research findings also reveal that production technology and Industrial Electronics students from a technical training institute in Malaysia have acquired slightly high degree of employability skills during their education and training program. Students in this institute are equipped with the skills needed for current workplace environment, especially in industrial sectors that focus more on technical and employability skills.

However, Robinson (2000) has a different opinion. She believes that employability skills are teachable skills and may be taught in both schools and employment settings. Therefore, the authority should set goals and objectives for teaching employability skills. Furthermore, she suggests that instructions should be designed to ensure goals and objectives are attainable. According to Poole and Zahn (1993), most employers require at least a high school diploma, and they are equally concerned about whether young people can get along with others on the job, are reliable, and can present themselves well to the public. They further add that the development of good employability skills should begin at home and often is the result of effective parenting. However, the development of such skills cannot be relied solely on parents and home. Thus, the teaching of employability skills belongs in the school curriculum. Zinser (2003) shares similar view. He believes that career and employability skills should be taught in schools, since many students leave education without the requisite skills to succeed in the adult work world. In addition to that, Washer (2007) emphasizes that graduates should leave higher education better in many ways than when they enter it. This improvement should be attributable to the undergraduate curriculum which is important to equip them with skills they can use to 'sell themselves' to employers.

Nowadays, most employers prefer to hire graduates from public universities since they are perceived to have the necessary academic qualifications and employability skills which are important in the current job environment. Generally employers who have the experience of hiring graduates from a public university are satisfied and happy with their graduates (Gurvinder Kaur & Sharan Kaur, 2008). On the other hand, another research done shows that graduates from Multimedia University (MMU), a well-known private university in Malaysia, has the highest employability as compared to its other counterparts from public universities. It shows that for its 100 graduates, other universities such as University Teknologi MARA (UiTM) has 77 employability, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) 74, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) 71, other overseas franchise universities 65, Universiti Malaya (UM) 63, Universiti Putra Malaysia (USM) 61, Universiti kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) 38, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) 35, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) 34 and Kolej Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn (KUITTHO) 0.8.

Employers today are concerned about finding good workers who have not only basic academic skills like reading, writing, Science, Mathematics, oral communication and listening, but also higher order thinking skills like learning, reasoning, thinking creatively, decision making and problem solving. Besides, they are also looking for employees who have personal qualities that among all include responsibility, self-confidence, self-control, social skills, honest, have integrity, adaptable and flexible, team spirit, punctual and efficient, self-directed, good work attitude, well groomed, cooperative, self motivated and self management. However, most of our graduates are not aware of this current phenomenon whereby they sometimes don't see the connection on what they do in class with the real job world that they will venture into later. Therefore, it is the duty of the lecturers to ensure that these students are well equipped with employability skills in order to further succeed in their job field later upon their graduation.

As we are living in a competitive world now, we can't deny the fact that we have to do what it takes to survive. Thus, as students they have to have good communication skills in particular they should be able to communicate well in English since it is an international language. English is used extensively in news and information, business, diplomacy, professions, travel and also entertainment (Kenji Kitao, 2006). One of the criteria needed by companies from their employees is the ability to communicate well especially in English. Based on a research done by Wan Irham, Shafinah & Azhari (2007) on the current needs of the R&D department in the Kedah industrial sectors, they find that the R&D department administrators stated that they look for candidates who have the abilities to generate and express ideas verbally in English (90%), to give presentations using English (90%), to write report in English (60%), to speak English fluently (60%), to have a good command of English language grammar (30%) and to have persuasive skills in English language (30%). The findings show us that it is a need for graduates now to master the language as it is used world-wide.

Another factor that needs to be considered is the mismatch between the skill mix of the human capital stock and the requirements of the industries in the country (Annie & Muk-Ngiik Wong (2006). Based on the survey done by Bank Negara Malaysia (as cited in Annie & Muk Ngii Wong, 2006, 2), it reveals that from the 187 companies that participated in the survey, 77.6% felt that graduates did not have the necessary skills, 31.3% noticed that graduates were unable to meet the potential employers' wage demands while 28.4% indicated that the universities were not producing sufficient number of graduates in selected fields. In conclusion, based on the result of survey done, we can conclude that employability skills play significant roles in our current job trend. Thus, in order for graduates to get a good job and survive in the competitive corporate world they have to fulfill the workplace skills requirement.

Munir, Aniswal & Haslinda (2005) state that the majority of respondents (97.9%) from their research said that all the personal qualities like willingness to learn new things, dedicated and committed, possess self-confidence, pleasant personality and approachable, have the drive to achieve results, resourceful and able to take initiatives, responsible, reliable and trustworthy, able to adjust and adapt to change, able to work independently, able to withstand pressure and uncertainty, able to self-evaluate own performance, obedient and compliant, knowledgeable and skillful, open-minded, helpful and possess ethnic and gender sensitivity are 'important' or 'very important'. There were low percentages for 'somewhat important' and 'not important' ie. 1.7 % of the employers said that the willingness to learn new things and 0.4% said that it was 'not important' to their firm. From the findings, we can learn that these respondents were reluctant to explore more and be pro-active to further expose themselves to new technology and anything that will affect their performance for the benefit of themselves and the organization as a whole.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Population*

This is a descriptive study using a survey method. The population consisted of 61 students of Diploma in Science at a local university in Malaysia. 40 of them were female students and 21 were male students. The sample was selected from the list of registered final semester students of Diploma in Science. This was because only final semester students of Diploma in Science were required to take English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). A total of 61 students participated and returned the questionnaires. The survey was conducted at the end of the semester.

#### *3.2 English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)*

EOP is designed to concentrate on workplace interactions in formal and informal job-related situations. Learning activities and tasks are discipline based. Learners are taught to be conscious of structures of texts in order to complete the tasks successfully. The course concentrates on the process rather than the end product.

### **4. Research Instruments**

To assess students' employability skills, Employability Skills Framework (2004-2008) and descriptive statistics were used.

### **5. Research Objectives**

The research was carried out to investigate these following research objectives:

- a. To determine whether undergraduates are able to identify employability skills that the employers seek.
- b. To determine whether gender influences perceptions of undergraduates on employability skills.

### **6. Findings and Discussions**

#### *6.1 Employability Skills among Diploma in Science Students*

Based on the finding, the participants chose Personal attributes as the most important employability skill. Personal attributes include loyalty, commitment, honesty, integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation, common sense, positive self-esteem, a sense of humor, motivation, adaptability, a balanced attitude to work and home life and ability to deal with pressure. This was indicated by the participants as personal attributes encompassed 25 % of employability skills. The second important employability skill was *Team work* at 17 %. *Team work* included working as an individual and a member of a team, coaching and mentoring. This might be caused by the participants' observations that workplace tasks usually require team work and collaborative tasks through classroom learning activities. The third important employability skill is *Self-Management* at 15 %. *Self-management* included having personal vision and goals, evaluating own performance, taking responsibility and articulate own ideas and vision. The fourth important employability skill was *Communication* at 10 %. *Learning* was categorized as the fifth important employability skill at 8% which included managing their own learning,

being open to new ideas, contributing to their learning community. *Initiative and enterprise* was the sixth important employability skill at 7 %. It was interesting to note that *Technology, Planning and Organizing* and *Problem Solving* were given equal importance at 6 % as the three least important employability skills.

### 6.2 Employability Skills among Female Undergraduates

When asked to rank the employability skills according to their importance, female students chose *Personal Attributes* as the most important employability skills at 25 %. The second important employability skill was *Team work* at 17%. The third important employability skill is *Self - Management* at 15 %. The fourth important employability skill was *Communication* at 11%. *Initiative and enterprise* was categorized as the fifth important employability skill at 9 %. *Learning* was the sixth important employability skill at 7 %. It was interesting to note that *Planning and organizing* and *Problem solving* were given equal importance at 6 %. *Technology* at 4 % was determined as the least important employability skill by female students.

### 6.3 Employability Skills among Male Undergraduates

When asked to rank the employability skills, just like female students, male students chose *Personal Attributes* as the most important employability skills at 24 %. The second important employability skill was *Team work* at 17 %. The third important employability skill is *Self management* at 14 %. The fourth important employability skills were *Communication and Learning* at 11 %. *Technology* was categorized as the fifth important employability skill at 8 %. *Planning and organizing* as the sixth important employability skill at 7 %. It was interesting to note that *problem solving and initiative and enterprise* were determined as the least important employability skills at 6 %.

### 6.4 Gender Differences among Diploma in Science Students on Employability Skills

Both genders agreed that *Personal Attributes* was the most important employability skill for employment. This was proven by female students decided that it encompassed 25 % of employability skills whereas male students decided that it was 24% of overall employability. Female undergraduates chose *Communication* as 11 % of employability skills while male undergraduates chose it as 9 % of employability skills. This might be due to the nature that female students emphasized on communication. Both genders shared the same opinion regarding team work as they ranked *Team work* as the second most important employability skill at 17% of overall employability. The same pattern can be said about *Problem solving* as female students chose 6% and male students chose 6% *Problem solving* as employability skills. Female students decided that *self-management* was at 15% of employability skills and male students chose *Self management* as 14% of employability skills. Female students decided that *Planning and organizing* was 6 % of employability skills and male students chose *Planning and organizing* as 7% of employability skills.

It was interesting to note that *Technology* was emphasized by 8 % of male students whereas only 4 % of female students chose *Technology* as criteria for employability. It was obvious that unlike female students, male students were influenced by technology gadgets and it was natural for them to assume that *Technology* would be vital in their career. In *Learning*, male students chose it as 9 % of employability skills and female students chose *Learning* as 7 % of employability skills. Whereas in *Initiative and enterprise*, female undergraduates decided that it was at 9 % of employability skills and male undergraduates decided that it was only at 6 % of employability skills.

## 7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that three major employability skills perceived by male and female students were *Personal Attributes, Team Work and Self-Management*. Both genders differ in four employability skills such as *Technology, Learning, Initiative and enterprise and Communication*. Whereas regarding *Problem Solving and Team Work*, there is not much difference between the genders. The study attempts to investigate whether English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) course increases undergraduates' employability skills. The study, although a preliminary study, finds out that the EOP course seems to increase students' employability skills. It is imperative to include employability skills in the syllabus and to ensure students are aware of the importance of employability skills to their future.

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