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Perception Differential between Employers and Instructors on the Importance of Employability Skills.

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Abstract

This study examines employers and instructors' perspectives towards university graduates' work attainment (readiness) as indicated by their generic skills. The specific objectives of the study are 1) to examine the perception of employers and instructors towards generic skills required and displayed by fresh graduates; 2) to examine the perception of instructors towards generic skills being taught (or inculcated) at universities; 3) to identify the mismatch between employers and students' perceptions toward generic skills required in terms of level of priority; Stratified random sampling was used to obtain the data and samples comprised 66 employers (29 multinational companies and 37 local companies) and 58 instructors from Science and Social Science backgrounds from three public universities in the Klang Valley. The data was collected using a questionnaire which was analysed using descriptive and inferential analysis. The findings indicate that there are indeed several areas of dissonance in the perception differential between employers and instructors on the importance of generic skills in terms of their priority in the workplace and the higher education curriculum.

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1. Background

The landscape of graduate recruitment has changed drastically over the last few decades. The era where candidates were hired based solely on hard technical knowledge as reflected in academic qualifications or work experience has given way to a call for graduates who wield a formidable array of the softer, people-oriented, work-related skills. The emphasis being placed on these soft skills, also known as generic skills, is associated with and reflective of the current trends in graduate recruitment. Like icing on a cake, these soft skills are now

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expected to complement current undergraduate education which can then be applied across a variety of system domains such as work productivity and community life. Understandably, concerns about whether Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) in Malaysia are preparing their graduates to fulfill the needs of employers have emerged, provoked by rather alarming statistics of thousands of graduates unable to secure employment due to various reasons. This is further exacerbated by the fact that every year in Malaysia, about 60,000 graduates from the public HLIs flood the employment market (Agus, Awang, Yussof, & Makhbul, 2011). Additionally, approximately the same number of graduates are produced by the private HLIs locally and internationally, engendering a fierce competition for limited jobs. The discrepancy between graduate numbers and successful employment is even more glaring when looking at the statistics revealed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) which reported that out of 155, 278 graduates, only 45% were employed in 2009 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Studies conducted prior to 2009 have suggested that this may have occurred due to the mismatches between graduate skills and employers' requirements (Asma & Lim, 2000; Yogeswaran, 2005; Wong & Hamali, 2006). An earlier report revealed that almost 70% of the graduates of public universities and other HLIs in the country are unemployed and continued with the scathing comment that "the clear cut issue in this case is that many of the local institutions of higher learning; both public and private have failed to offer a sufficiently rigorous education to produce the necessary quality in the workforce which the industry requires". The report went on to add that "a lot of factors are said to have contributed to this situation...from unstable economic growth right to the individuals who are not competent or capable to secure a job because they are selective, lazy, not willing to accept low salaries, not willing to relocate, lack of communication skills, not creative, and etc (Education Malaysia, 2006, cited in Worran, Bernadette & Rammilah, 2009, p. 2). Could this damaging information be true? Sadly, this information has been corroborated by a survey undertaken by JobStreet.com, a major Malaysian internet employment agency involving 3,300 human resource personnel and bosses, which revealed that the top reasons for graduate unemployment are lack of proficiency in English (56%) followed by bad social etiquette (36%). Added to these are demanding exorbitant salaries (32%), possessing irrelevant qualifications (30%), and being overly choosy about jobs (23%) (Salina, Nurazariah, Noraina, & Rajadurai, 2011). From the evidence presented, it appears then that the primary causal factors for graduate unemployment in Malaysia is not a lack of technical knowledge but the lack of "polish" or the finishing touch which enables the graduates to make the successful transition from students to employees.

For its part, the MOHE has acknowledged these concerns in the National Higher Education Action Plan (2007-2010), where it was noted that "the MOHE intends to strengthen the foundation of our higher education institutions (HEIs) and take the necessary steps to enhance the overall capability of our higher education system to produce human capital with first-class mentality. Unemployment among new graduates is a phenomenon that...could be caused by several factors such as the slowing rate of economic growth, unexpected shifts in demand from one industry to another, and mismatches between market requirements and the graduates that HEIs produce. Even though it is inaccurate to apportion complete blame on HEIs, this matter is examined at length by this Plan. To improve employability aspects amongst our graduates, a greater role is being asked of our HEIs. Emphasis has been placed on the often-cited lack of language fluency and critical thinking on the part of graduates across the board" (p.11). With specific regard to these skills, the MOHE has instituted the implementation of generic skills into the curriculum in Malaysian HLIs, focusing on seven core skills comprising *Communication Skills; Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills; Teamwork Skills; Lifelong Learning and Information Management; Integrity and Professional Ethics; Entrepreneurship Skills; and Leadership Skills* (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). The manner and frequency in which these skills are integrated into the curriculum has been left to the academic management of individual HLIs. As it is, almost all HLIs have integrated soft skills by embedding them directly into the curriculum through both academic and extra-curricular activities. It has been close to 7 years since the JobStreet survey and the Education Malaysia report were published and the MOHE directive on soft skills was implemented in HLIs. Has there been any improvement? Unfortunately, it seems that there hasn't. Going by recent research, the mismatch between graduates and the demands of employers is still rampant (Malhi, 2009; Pandian, 2010; Ramakrishnan & Mohd Yasin, 2011). These studies reveal that the main factor affecting graduates' employability was still the severe limitation or complete

lack of soft/ generic skills among the Malaysian graduates. This begs the questions; are these generic skills that important in securing a job? After all, shouldn't technical knowledge be equally if not more important? The answer to these questions is irrefutable. A study conducted by the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Melon Foundation involving Fortune 500 CEOs revealed that 75% of getting and maintaining a job successfully is supported by individual's generic/soft skills while only 25% accounts for hard skills or technical knowledge (Malhi, 2009). This underscores the vital role that these generic skills play in the current scheme of employment and retention. It also makes it crystal clear that such skills should not and cannot be underestimated by higher education policy makers and providers.

As stated earlier in this paper, *generic skills* refer to "employability" skills used in tandem with the application of technical knowledge in the workplace. Most importantly, these skills are not job specific, but are skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs at all levels. The degree to which students develop these skills determines how they solve problems, write reports, function in teams, self assess and do performance reviews of others, go about learning new knowledge, and manage stress when they have to cope with change (Defining Generic Skills, 2003).

Since employers are the most influential stakeholders when it comes to the employment of graduates, it is crucial to investigate the employers' perception on the issue of employability in order to ascertain the most important generic skills employers seek in graduates. Additionally, as Malaysia seeks to become a global financial and commercial player, generic skills requirements as perceived by the multinational employers are becoming increasingly important as well. Is there a possibility that the generic skills required by employers of multinationals may differ from those required by local employers? If there are differences, are the instructors of HLIs aware of and inculcating these skills accordingly? Although the issue of mismatch of graduates' skills with the requirements of the employers has been discussed and argued at length in previous studies, hardly any local studies have been devoted to investigating mismatches based on the categorical perceptions of local and multinational employers in terms of the hierarchical importance of each of these skills. In order to complete the employability loop, the perceptions of the instructors in selected HLIs are also included in this study to ensure that the perceptions of both the providers and recipients of the skills are adequately represented.

This study is two-pronged in that it aims to determine the perceptions of employers and instructors towards the hierarchical importance of each of the seven skills as recommended by the MOHE. In doing so, this study hopes to fill the gap in previous research by uncovering the priority of generic skills in terms of the hierarchy of importance as perceived by the different categories of employers. This study also intends to find out whether instructors are inculcating the generic skills that are parallel with those sought by employers, the ultimate aim being to locate the mismatches and suggest a higher education curriculum that is aligned to the needs of the employers and the future success of graduates.

2. Objective

The objective of this paper is to report an aspect of an ongoing study to examine the perceptions of employers and instructors (or lecturers) towards graduates' work requirement and readiness as indicated by their generic skills. The specific objectives of the study are to determine:

1. the perceptions of employers from both multinational and local employment sectors towards the generic skills required of and displayed by fresh graduates;
2. the perceptions of instructors towards the generic skills required of and displayed by fresh graduates; and
3. the priorities of generic skills in terms of rank as perceived by the different categories of employers and instructors.

3. Methodology

This descriptive study employed a survey instrument to examine the perceptions of employers and instructors towards graduates' employability as indicated by their generic skills. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to draw the sample from a population for both groups. The employers were selected from various industries and priority was given to the top-level management to respond to the survey to echo the requirements of actual stakeholders who are responsible for hiring graduates to work in the organisation.

In this study, a questionnaire was mailed to 135 companies (comprising both national and multinational companies) with a return rate of approximately 50%. From the 66 questionnaires received from the employers, 29 (44%) were from employers representing multinationals like Petronas, United Overseas Bank, IBM, and Shell and 37 (56%) were employers representing local entities such as TM Berhad, Indah Water Konsortium, Takaful Insurance, and Bank Muamalat. Similarly, a questionnaire was also administered to 58 instructors from three public universities in Klang Valley from both the science (n = 28) and social science (n = 30) faculties.

The questionnaire, incorporating the seven generic skills (ranked according to priority), was adapted from the study conducted by Parmjit, Imran, Roslind, Adlan, and Zamaliah (2012). The seven generic skills are (a) communication skills, (b) critical thinking and problem solving, (c) teamwork, (d) lifelong learning and information management, (e) integrity and professional ethics, (f) entrepreneurship and (g) leadership. To reiterate, these reflect the soft skills as implemented by the MOHE in all Malaysian HLIs. This questionnaire, of which there were two versions, one for employers and the other for instructors, was employed to determine their perceptions towards university graduates' work readiness as indicated by their generic skills and their priorities of these skills. The priorities were determined by getting the respondents to rank the skills using a scale ranging from 1 denoting least important (least required) to 5 denoting most important (most required) for each of the generic skills.

4. Findings

4.1 Employers and Instructors' Perceptions of Fresh Graduates' Generic Skills

Table 1 shows the mean values and rankings of each generic skill as perceived by employers and university instructors.

Table 1: Employers (n = 66) & Instructors' (n = 56) Perceptions of Fresh Graduates' Generic Skills

Generic Skills	Employers			Instructors		
	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank
Communication Skills	4.44	.58	1	4.53	.59	1
Problem Solving & Critical Thinking	4.12	.75	5	4.43	.60	3
Teamwork	4.21	.63	4	4.35	.53	4
Lifelong Learning & Information Management	4.27	.62	3	4.29	.72	5
Integrity & Professional Ethics	4.44	.65	2	4.47	.75	2
Entrepreneurship	3.61	.89	7	3.86	.94	7
Leadership	3.94	.86	6	4.05	.75	6

Scale: 1 = Least Required to 5 = Most Required

Table 1 reveals that the highest ranked generic skills as sought by employers as a single entity are *Communication Skills* (mean = 4.44, SD = .59) and *Integrity & Professional Ethics* (mean = 4.44, SD = .65)

followed by *Lifelong Learning and Information Management* (mean = 4.27, SD = .62) while the lowest ranked are *Leadership Skills* and *Entrepreneurship Skills* with a mean of 3.94 (SD = .86) and 3.61 (SD= .89) respectively. Not surprisingly, the two highest-ranked skills from the instructors' perspective echo those preferred by the employers. The instructors scored *Communication Skills* at a mean of 4.53, SD = .59 followed by *Integrity & Professional Ethics* at a mean of 4.47, SD = .75. Coincidentally, *Leadership Skills* and *Entrepreneurship Skills* were also scored as the two lowest-ranked skills by the instructors. The next skill, ranked fourth in importance by both groups was *Teamwork* at a mean of 4.21, SD= .63 by employers and a mean of 4.35, SD=.53 by the instructors. The difference in priorities for both groups came with *Problem Solving & Critical Thinking Skills* with instructors ranking it as third highest (mean 4.43, SD=.60) while employers ranked it no.5 (mean 4.12, SD=.75). Thus, of the seven skills, both employers and instructors were aligned in their perceptions of the four skills which they regard as the most and least important for employability.

4.2 Multinational and Local Employers' Perceptions of Fresh Graduates' Generic Skills

Table 2 focuses on the differences in the priorities of generic skills as perceived by employers of multinational and local companies. Interestingly, for employers of multinationals, *Integrity & Professional Ethics* (mean 4.36, SD= .66) was ranked as the most important, followed by *Communication Skills* mean 4.34, SD= .52) and *Problem Solving & Critical Thinking* (mean 4.29, SD= .70). On the other hand, the top 3 skills as sought by employers of local companies are *Communication Skills* (mean 4.51, SD= .61), followed by *Integrity & Professional Ethics* (mean 4.50, SD= .65) and *Lifelong Learning & Information Management* (mean 4.35, SD= .57). The glaring difference in the perceptions of the two groups of employers came with the ranking of the skills of *Problem Solving & Critical Thinking* where the multinational employers ranked it as third most important as compared to the employers of local organisations who ranked it sixth out of the seven skills, which indicates that this skill was not important to them.

Table 2: Multinational and Local Employers' Perceptions of Fresh Graduates' Generic Skills

Generic Skills	Mean	Multinational		Mean	Local	
		SD	Rank		SD	Rank
Communication Skills	4.34	.52	2	4.51	.61	1
Problem Solving & Critical Thinking	4.29	.70	3	3.98	.76	6
Teamwork	4.14	.61	5	4.27	.65	4
Lifelong Learning & Information Management	4.16	.67	4	4.35	.57	3
Integrity & Professional Ethics	4.36	.66	1	4.50	.65	2
Entrepreneurship	3.45	.87	7	3.72	.90	7
Leadership	3.79	.94	6	4.05	.77	5

Scale: 1 = Least Required to 5 = Most Required

4.3 Employers' Perceptions towards the Generic Skills displayed by Fresh Graduates in their companies

Table 3: Employers' Perceptions of the Generic Skills displayed by Fresh Graduates in their Employment

Generic Skills	Mean	SD
Communication Skills	3.67	.90
Problem Solving & Critical Thinking	3.31	.98
Teamwork	3.47	.87
Lifelong Learning & Information Management	3.46	.99
Integrity & Professional Ethics	3.60	1.03
Entrepreneurship	3.36	1.04
Leadership	3.34	1.11

Scale: 1 = Low to 5 = High

Table 3 indicates the employers' perceptions of the generic skills actually displayed by the graduates in their employment. The overall analysis seems to indicate that the mean value is lower than 4.00 (ranging from a low 3.31 to 3.67) which indicates that the employers' perceptions of the generic skills as currently displayed by the fresh graduates in their employment is much lower than required or expected from fresh graduates. The interesting question is to find out if there is a significant difference in the seven generic skills displayed by fresh graduates as perceived by multinational employers and local employers.

4.4 Multinational and Local Employers' Perspectives of Fresh Graduates' Generic Skills

Table 4 shows that the multinational employers indicate a lower mean score for all the seven generic skills displayed by fresh graduates as compared to local employers. In other words, the multinational employers perceive the fresh graduates in their employment as displaying a much lower level of generic skills as compared to the perception of the local employers. The differential perception in both categories of employers was highlighted by using an independent sample t-test.

Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference in the mean scores at the 0.05 level for *Communication Skills* [$t(62) = -2.445$, $p < .05$], *Lifelong Learning & Information Management* [$t(62) = -2.451$, $p < .05$], and *Integrity & Professional Ethics* [$t(62) = -2.236$, $p < .05$]. This means that in terms of fresh graduates actually displaying these particular skills, the multinational employers rate them as significantly lacking in the fresh graduates in their employment as compared to their local counterparts.

Table 4: Independent Sample t-test

Generic Skills			Mean	SD	t	df	sig
Communication Skills	Multinational	29	3.37	.86	-2.445	62	.017
	Local	35	3.91	.87			
Problem Solving & Critical Thinking	Multinational	29	3.17	.95	-1.035	62	.305
	Local	35	3.42	1.01			
Teamwork	Multinational	29	3.29	.87	-1.475	62	.145
	Local	35	3.61	.85			
Lifelong Learning & Information Management	Multinational	29	3.13	.96	-2.451	62	.017
	Local	35	3.72	.95			
Integrity & Professional Ethics	Multinational	29	3.29	1.04	-2.236	62	.029
	Local	35	3.85	.96			
Entrepreneurship	Multinational	29	3.34	1.04	-.101	62	.920
	Local	35	3.37	1.05			
Leadership	Multinational	29	3.17	1.13	-1.120	62	.267
	Local	35	3.48	1.09			

4.5 Instructors' Perceptions of Fresh Graduates' Generic Skills

Table 5 indicates that the instructors, just like the employers, perceive fresh graduates as displaying a low level of generic skills as indicated by a low score of 3.30 to 3.77 (below 4). Nevertheless, in rating the skills that are taught in HLIs, the highest priority, according to instructors, is *Teamwork* (mean = 3.84, SD = .71) followed by *Communication Skills* (mean = 3.83, SD = .67) and *Problem Solving & Critical Thinking Skills* (mean = 3.71, SD = .79) with the lowest priority given to *Integrity & Professional Ethics* (mean = 3.63, SD = .74) and *Entrepreneurship Skills* (mean = 3.53, SD = .93).

Table 5: Comparison of Instructors' Perceptions of Generic Skills Displayed by Fresh Graduates & those taught in Universities

Generic Skills	Mean	SD	Rank	Mean	SD	Rank
	Skills Displayed by Graduates			Skills Taught by Instructors		
Communication Skills	3.57	.79	1	3.83	.79	2
Problem Solving & Critical Thinking	3.53	.79	5	3.71	.71	3
Teamwork	3.77	.72	4	3.84	.86	1
Lifelong Learning & Information Management	3.42	.95	3	3.67	.74	4
Integrity & Professional Ethics	3.50	.81	2	3.63	.93	6
Entrepreneurship	3.30	.97	7	3.52	.77	7
Leadership	3.45	.78	6	3.65	.79	5

5. Discussion

This study is primarily aimed at identifying the mismatches, if any, in employers and instructors' perceptions of the generic skills required by fresh graduates to gain employment and the actual display of these skills. Additionally, the study also focused on the differences in perceptions of the multinational and local employers with regards to the actual display of these generic skills by fresh graduates in their employment. The findings reveal that while *Communication Skills* and *Integrity & Professional Ethics* were conclusively identified by both employers and instructors as the most important generic skills required for employment, multinational employers rated *Integrity and Professional Ethics* as no. 1 on their list as compared to *Communication Skills* for local employers. Previous studies (Ken & Cheah, 2012; Syed Hassan et al., 2009; IPPTN, 2007) concur that *Communication Skills* is the most required skill and this trend seem to be indicate a slight shift in current requirements, especially in Malaysian settings. From the above findings, it can be deduced that employers, be they local or multinational, require their employees to be ethical and possess integrity in order to contribute effectively to their organization. Brown, McHardy, McNabb and Taylor (2011) state that employees' loyalty and dedication are essential features that underscore and elevate organisational performance. These attributes are considered crucial factors to judge and improve performance since employees are an integral human resource investment. A study by Latisha and Surina (2010) in a Malaysian setting also reported that employers are seeking graduates who have positive personal values including integrity, honesty, confidence, self-control, understanding, and personal grooming. These can be encompassed under *Integrity and Professional Ethics* which concurs with the findings in this study. It looks like this particular skill, in addition to *Communication Skills*, needs to be emphasised in the higher education curriculum. Is this being done? This is where the second part of this study leads to as it reveals clearly the difference, and hence mismatch, in the employers' perception of the importance of this skill and the instructors' perception of the important skills being taught in the HLIs with instructors indicating that compared to the high-priority skills of *Teamwork*, *Communication Skills*, and *Problem Solving & Critical Thinking*, the lowest priority was given to the skill of *Integrity & Professional Ethics* as a taught skill. This sheds light on the glaring mismatch between the skills that instructors perceive as important to teach at HLIs and those perceived by employers as important for employment. This dissonance of perceptions on the importance of a crucial generic skill reveals the misalignment of priorities between the providers and the recipients of graduate attributes. While the skills of *Teamwork*, *Communication Skills*, and *Problem Solving & Critical Thinking* are laudable in their own right, it is imperative that HLIs acknowledge and address the mismatch in order to adequately prepare their graduates for successful employment. A review of the current higher education curriculum is thus definitely timely in view of the results uncovered in this study. A shift of priorities to emphasize the inculcation of *Integrity & Professional Ethics* in tandem with the other generic skills is now justified given the evidence unearthed in this and other studies. Failure to shift gears and accelerate the acquisition of those skills prioritized by the employers will seriously damage fresh graduates' employment opportunities and derail their long-term life plans (Muk-Ngiik Wong & Jamil, 2006). This could have an adverse effect on the national economy with repercussions arising from thousands of unemployed and unemployable graduates at loose ends fritting away the nation's valuable human resource investment, not to mention the massive waste of the taxpayers' ringgit funding these graduates' education in public HLIs. As such, this is an issue that requires a swift and salient response from all parties with vested interests in higher education, graduate employment, and national economic progress.

Other than the mismatch mentioned above, it is also interesting to note the differences in the perceptions of the two groups of employers in terms of their ranking of the fresh graduates' generic skills in their employment. It appears that the multinational employers are far less forgiving as, across the board, they ranked the graduates' generic skills as significantly lower compared to local employers. A reason for this discrepancy could be that as multinational employers they are subject to a more formidable internationally-sanctioned set of standards and, in turn, set much higher standards and expectations for their staff. In contrast, local employers, not bound to satisfy international standards, are perhaps more relaxed in their expectations of their employees' performance, hence their considerably higher rankings of the generic skills displayed by the fresh graduates in their employment. The

differences in work and organisational culture between the multinationals and local companies could also figure significantly in this mismatch. Multinationals operate along international working standards to which their staff is expected to adhere while local companies would generally operate along local work culture standards which is far more 'relaxed', hence, the discrepancies in the rankings. The issue here is not so much why the two groups of employers differ in their perceptions but whether Malaysian HLIs are aware of this mismatch and are taking action to address it. This is a vital area of concern for higher education providers as the nation embraces globalisation and is in the process of actively expanding its industrial and commercial boundaries. The need to prioritize the generic skills emphasised by multinational employers in the higher education curriculum thus becomes all the more pertinent given the nation's goals and vision.

6. Conclusion

This study has discussed the employers and instructors' perceptions towards graduates' work readiness as indicated by their generic skills. The findings show that the employers' perceptions indicate *Integrity and Professional Ethics* and *Communication Skills* as the most sought after skills while the instructors are accentuating *Teamwork Skills* in their teaching although this skill is not highly prioritized by the employers. These findings indicate that there is a serious mismatch between the generic skills demanded by employers and the generic skills taught in universities. In terms of ranking of priority, both employers and instructors selected *Communication Skills* followed by *Integrity & Professional Ethics* and *Lifelong Learning and Information Management* as the three most important generic skills required by fresh graduates to gain employment. It is important to acknowledge the mismatches in the required, displayed and taught generic skills because such an understanding will enable HLIs and the MOHE to work out tenable solutions to address these mismatches. There can be numerous explanations for the occurrence of such mismatches but, as already mentioned, what is important is to find the best way to close the gaps in the teaching and preparation of graduates to gain and maintain employment. Thus, the onus is now on the MOHE, the HLIs, and the instructors to devise an all-in-one curriculum that can deliver both technical knowledge and the requisite generic skills to satisfy even the most fastidious employer. In ending this paper, we would like to quote Paul Redmond, president elect of AGCAS, and head of careers and employability at the University of Liverpool who succinctly stated that "Decent higher education should produce employable graduates, regardless of subject of study or academic discipline. Employers know this, which is why when recruiting so few of them specify academic disciplines. What they want is bright, enthusiastic, motivated and 'sparky' graduates – people who can get things done without causing mass walkouts or criminal lawsuits. One senior banker told me recently: "You know, banking today isn't technical – you don't need a calculator. What you need is to be good with people, good at seeing things from other points of view." (Papadatou, The Guardian, 24, October 2011)

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