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Fit or Unfit? Perspectives of Employers and University Instructors of Graduates' Generic Skills

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Abstract

Despite all the mechanisms introduced by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and the universities to ensure that graduates leave the institution fit for employment, the fact remains that many employers decry the quality of fresh graduates, particularly in the area of generic or soft skills (Morshidi Sirat et al., 2008). This study was undertaken to identify areas of consonance (and/or dissonance) in the perceptions of instructors and employers with regards to the generic skills that graduates should possess upon leaving the university (Ministry of Human Resource, 2009). The findings of such a study would reveal if universities were emphasizing the skills that the employers looked for in their employees. Using a questionnaire, the study sampled 124 employers and 126 instructors in the Klang valley. The findings reveal that there is some degree of consonance in the generic skills perceived as important for employability by instructors and employers, with communication skills taking pole position, followed closely by integrity and professional ethics, and teamwork. Interestingly, critical thinking and problem solving skills, highly regarded in the educational arena was not deemed as vitally important by the employers. Although this study shows that the university curriculum is aligned to the needs of the industry in terms of the top three generic skills demanded by employers, the question remains as to why a large number of graduates remain unemployed. Are the skills being adequately deployed by the graduates themselves? In attempting to transform local higher education to meet world-class standards, graduate (un)employability is a high-stake issue which demands immediate redress. This study attempts to throw some light on this contentious issue.

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1. Background

In recent decades, the graduate employment landscape has been drastically transformed. The parameters constraining employability have expanded beyond mere academic qualifications and working experience, to embrace more non-technical or practical work-related skills that facilitate the work process of the establishment. These non-technical or work-related skills have been referred to by many terms but are most familiar as soft or generic skills, comprising a “a set of achievements skills, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. They are generally skills that cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs” (Yorke, 2008; Sherer & Eadie, 1987 cited in Nik Hairi, Azmi, Rusyda, Arena & Khairani 2012, p.103). Nik Hairi et al (2012) also cite Mason (2006) that “from the employers’ perspective ‘employability’ seems to refer to ‘work readiness’, that is, possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after commencing employment.” (p.103)

These generic skills, once considered value-added, are no longer an addendum to a graduate's transcript but have become integral to graduate employability. "Like icing on a cake, these soft skills are now expected to complement current undergraduate education which can then be applied across a variety of system domains such as work productivity and community life" (Parmjit, Roslind, & Adlan, 2012, p.1) Naturally, the subsequent concern is whether the Malaysian Higher Learning Institutes (HLIs) are capable of furnishing university students with such skills. This question is certainly not a trivial one, economically at least, given the overwhelming volume of graduates produced each year by Malaysian public and private institutions alike that has reached as many as over 100,000 graduates per year (Agus, Awang, Yussof, & Makhbul, 2011). Leading from this is an even more worrying trend that is the increasing number of unemployed graduates as disclosed by reports compiled by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) that reveal that out of 155, 278 graduates, only 45% were employed in 2009 (Ministry of Human Resource, 2009). Even as recently, as late 2011, 40,000 graduates remained jobless, having to resort to part-time, freelance, and odd jobs. (Bernama, Education Transformation Needful, 2012). The predicament is thus clear and neither the government nor the employers are holding back the truth: many of the graduates are simply unwanted. The usage of the word 'unwanted' is most appropriate here, as, the lack of job opportunities is not the primary reason for such a disturbing trend. There is overwhelming evidence that the root of the problem seems to point to the graduates themselves (Education Malaysia, 2006, cited in Worrn, Bernadette and Rammilah, 2009; Malhi, 2009). In attempting to rectify this issue, the Prime Minister in his Budget address last year said “Every year about 180,000 students graduate with diplomas and degrees from institutions of higher learning. The Government will launch the Graduate Employability (GE) Blueprint to assist unemployed graduates by the end of 2012. The GE Blueprint focuses on strengthening the employability of graduates. The Government will establish a Graduate Employability Taskforce with an allocation of RM200 million.” (National Graduate Employability Blueprint, 2012). This highlights the intensity of the efforts made by the government to overcome this issue.

A dismal catalogue of graduate deficiencies has emerged from a survey from a major online employment agency that reveals that the top reasons for graduates being rejected by employers are the lack of proficiency in English (56%) followed by bad social etiquette (36%), demanding exorbitant salaries (32%), possessing irrelevant qualifications (30%), and being overly choosy about jobs (23%) (Salina, Nurazariah, Noraina, & Rajadurai, 2011). Similarly, a study conducted by the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Mellon 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). Although the issue has long been discussed, debated upon, and worked into ministerial and university policies, this disturbing trend still persists with recent research pointing to a worrying dissonance between the HLIs' and employers' expectations of graduate competencies (Pandian, 2010; Ramakrishnan & Mohd Norizan, 2011). The MoHE's National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, details the agenda and transformation plan to address policy as well as curricular and pedagogical shortcomings in HLIs with regards to the equipping of graduates with the relevant employability skills. This blueprint takes note that “there are significant shortcomings that HLIs need to address urgently to enhance GE. Industry players are the employers and as such, they are the “buyers” who seek value for

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