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The Social And Academic Skills And The Marketability Of UKM's Graduates

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the effects of the social and academic factors towards the marketability of UKM's graduates. 273 second year students were responded to questionnaire survey with respect to their perceptions on factors that influence their job marketability. Four instruments on social factors were employed consisting of 21 items; four instruments with 15 items were formed in the academic factor; Marketability was measured by eight instruments consisting of 24 items. By using Person's product moment correlation, all items were significantly contributed to the dependent variable with an estimated index (β) of ≥ 0.6 with $p = <0.001$. Furthermore, regression analysis was employed in which both social and academic factors had strong influence on students' marketability (58.9% with $F = 193.253$ and $p <0.001$). However, social factor seemed to have an upper hand on academic factor (social factor with $\beta =0.539$; $t = 7.398$; $p = <0.001$ and academic factor with $\beta =0.255$; $t = 3.504$; $p = <0.001$). From this study, students' soft skills are very important role in their marketability when they leave their universities. Therefore, universities must realize and take serious action in providing enough knowledge to students on various soft skills that are required by public and private sectors.

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Keywords: Marketability; unemployment; social factor; academic factor

1. Introduction

Students with university degree are not a guarantee ticket to get job in the open market. This is due to the fact that

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every year thousands of students have graduated from various universities, locally or internationally. Moreover, the jobs offered by public and private sectors are not enough to support the demand. Therefore, it contributes to the increase unemployment rate among graduates from public and private institutions in Malaysia recently (Krish et al., 2012). At present, there are more than 38 public and private universities, more than 500 university colleges, branch campuses of local and overseas institutions, open universities and other institutions, including with non-university status. Although the latest available statistics from the Department of Statistics (DOS), Malaysia, shows that Malaysia has a very low unemployed rate of 3.3% as of December 2012 (Sim, 2013), of concern is the number of unemployed of graduates that Malaysian higher learning institutions produced each year. According to the Malaysian Higher Education Ministry, universities, university colleges and polytechnics nationwide produced 184,581 graduates in 2011 and 44,391 or 24.6 % of them have not found a job after six months of graduating. The report also revealed that most of the unemployed graduates were predominantly in the 20 to 29 age cohort. Moreover, the Minister of Human Resources revealed that more female graduates in this country were unemployed because they lacked the relevant skills required in the labor market despite having excellent academic results. It is estimated that about 140,000 new graduates will enter the employment market for the next two years (Edree, 2011). Hence, unemployed graduates have become a cause of concern in Malaysia.

Unemployment is an issue that is related with the marketability of graduates from public or private institutions. The Malaysia Labour Force Survey defined the unemployed as persons who were available for work but did not work during a reference period. The question is that why are a quarter of our graduates unable to be employed despite spending three to four years of their lives studying? This could be caused by a mismatch of talent produced by our higher learning institutions or it could be the ineffective delivery system. However, based on the Department of Statistic report (Columnist, 2013) majority of the graduates are lacking of core knowledge and competency in the job they applied for, lack of communication skills and language proficiency; and lack of general knowledge (Ismail, 2011). As there are so many unemployed graduate at present, research should be carried out to find why this problem exists and what can be done to overcome it. Hence, this paper attempts to analyse, to what extent, the social and academic factors play a significant role in determining the UKM students' marketability. Several items of the two instruments will be taken into account for the analysis.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This is a quantitative research aiming to determine the relationship between dependent and independent variables (Hopkins, 2000). Meanwhile, the approach of this study is based on the *ex post facto* research methodology. This research methodology is trying to observe variation in the studied variables as well as retrospective study that is a study that involves collection of data about the past events. This research design is mainly employed to measure and understand change and to include a time dimension to the data that can be used to identify causal factors contributing to any observed change. In this case, the study attempts to trace back the effects of the soft skills knowledge (Independent Variable, IV) acquired by the respondents on their marketability in entrepreneurial world (Dependent Variable, DV).

This study was conducted at Universiti Kebangsaan in Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia and the samples were chosen from the second year students of the year 2013. They were from various disciplines i.e. sciences base as well as non-sciences base. The research was adopted the simple and group random sampling techniques in order to gather 273 respondents. The samples were then tested by using G-Power software version 3.1 to determine and verify whether the samples used were good enough to represent and generalise the population based on the size effect of 0.3 and statistical power of 80%.

2.2. Research Instruments

As the research was fully adopted the quantitative approach, then questionnaire survey technique was employed to get information from the random samples. A set of questionnaire survey of four sections was distributed to respondents. The four sections are respondents' background; 15 items for academic soft skill measurement; 21 items for social soft skill measurement; 24 items for marketability scale (expectations questionnaire devised) (Pemberon, 1998). In terms of validity, the three measurements were at the product moment correlation index of $r = < 0.6$

whereby the reliability test showed that the measurements at the alpha index (α) of < 0.9 .

2.3. Statistical analysis

Data for this research were analysed according to objectives and research instruments as follows:

2.3.1. Scoring

Table 1. Three levels of scoring for the three instruments

	Scoring range		
	Academic skill	Social skill	Marketability
Low level	15-35	21-49	24-56
Medium level	36-55	50-77	57-88
High level	56-75	78-105	89-120

Three levels of scoring were used in the study i.e. low, medium and high levels (Table 1). For the academic skill the low level score of the range 15 to 35, meanwhile the medium score was at the range of 36 to 55 and the high of the range 56 to 75. In terms of social skill, the low level was measured at the range of 21 to 49; the medium level was at the range of 50 to 77 and the high level of the range 78 to 105. The last instrument that is marketability the low, medium and the high levels were measured at the range of 24 to 56, 57 to 88 and 89 to 120, respectively.

2.4. Data analysis

By using SPSS software of the Version 20, data for this study were analysed by using descriptive and inference statistics. In order to analyse the students' demographic, academic skill, social skill and marketability profiles descriptive statistic was used such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation (SD). Meanwhile, inference statistic such as multiple regression was used to analyse the influence of academic skill (IV) and social skill (IV) on the marketability of the second year students (DV). Significant level of 0.05 was used in order to determine the strength of the relationship. Meanwhile, the effect size ($1-\alpha$) at the level of 0.3 and statistical power at the level of 80% were employed in this study.

3. Result and discussion

Table 2 shows the information about the demographic of students' profile. The result indicated that more female than male respondents (71.7% vs 28.3%). In terms of age cohorts, the study found that more respondents of the age below 21 years. Malay respondents were more than the non-Malays'. The highest number of respondents was from the faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (19.8%) followed closely by the faculty of Science and Technology (17.6%) and faculty of Health Sciences (14.7%). The less number of respondents was from the faculty of medicine (3.3%) and Education (3.7%).

Table 3 shows the profile of the respondents' academic skill. It showed that the highest frequency and percentage of academic skill among respondents was at the scoring level of 56 – 75 that was 60.4% and the lower of 2.6% was calculated for the scoring level of 15 – 35. In general, the academic skill of the respondents was at the highest level (Mean=56.39, and SD=9.59).

The profile of the social skill of respondents is shown in Table 4. It indicated that the highest frequency and percentage of social skill among respondents was at the scoring level of 78 – 105 that was 61.5% and the lower of 2.6% was calculated for the scoring level of 21 – 49. Generally, the social skill of the respondents was at the highest level (Mean=78.38, and SD=13.03).

Table 2. Information about demographic profile of the respondents

Variables	Frequency	%
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Sex		
Males	77	28.3
Females	195	71.7
Age cohorts		
21 and below	113	58.5
Above 21 years	80	41.5
Ethnicity		
Malay	205	76.5
Non Malay	63	23.5
Faculty		
Pharmacy	20	7.3
Medicine	9	3.3
Education	10	3.7
Health Sciences	40	14.7
Islamic Studies	27	9.9
Law	3	1.1
Science and Technology	48	17.6
Economic and Management	25	9.2
Engineering	21	7.7
Science Social and Humanities	54	19.8
Information Science Technology	16	5.9

The profile of the social skill of respondents is shown in Table 4. It indicated that the highest frequency and percentage of social skill among respondents was at the scoring level of 78 – 105 that was 61.5% and the lower of 2.6% was calculated for the scoring level of 21 – 49. Generally, the social skill of the respondents was at the highest level (Mean=78.38, and SD=13.03).

The profile of the respondents' marketability is shown in Table 5. It showed that highest frequency and percentage of marketability among respondents was at the scoring level of 89 – 120 that was 55.3% and the lower of 1.1% was calculated for the scoring level of 24 – 56. In general, the marketability of the respondents was at the highest level (Mean=89.06, and SD=13.49).

Further study was carried in an attempt to find the relationship between the dependent variable that is marketability and the two independent variables, social and academic skills of the respondents. The result of the multiple regression is shown in Table 6. It is clearly indicated that the two independent variables play a significant role on the respondents' marketability (58.9% with the value of $F = 193.253$ and $p < 0.05$). Moreover, social skill was more dominance than the academic skill in which its β value of 0.539 with $t = 7.398$ and $p < 0.001$. The β value of the academic skill was only 0.255 with the $t = 3.504$ and $p < 0.001$. From this result, therefore, the study achieved it objective significantly. Besides, we believed that there are other factors that contribute to the high number of unemployed graduate at present, such as entrepreneurial skill and leadership.

One possible reason why there are so many unemployed graduate at present is the focus of higher education institutions and the needs of the labor market for graduates are not as compatible as they were ten to twenty years ago. We can see now that the labor market is more competitive and volatile. In addition, graduates face difficulties in getting jobs because they are not ready for the industry. Perhaps, the knowledge of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), industrial training course (Nora Muda et al., 2012) acquired by students does not quite meet the expectations of the industry (Graduate unemployment in Malaysia, 2011). Perhaps, the formal curriculums of public universities lack emphasis on the integration of soft skills in the curriculum as stated by Wilson Rangka et al. (2011).

Table 3. The profile of respondents' academic skill

Scoring level	Frequency	%
15 – 35	7	2.6

Table 4. The profile of respondents' social skill

Scoring level	Frequency	%
21 – 49	7	2.6

36 – 55	101	37.0	50 – 77	98	35.9
56 - 75	165	60.4	78 - 105	168	61.5
Total	273	100.0	Total	273	100.0
Mean = 56.39 (highest level); SD = 9.59			Mean = 78.38 (highest level); SD = 13.03		

Table 5. The profile of respondents' marketability

Scoring level	Frequency	%
(24-56)	3	1.1
(57-88)	119	43.6
(89-120)	151	55.3
Total	273	100.0
Mean = 89.06 (highest level) and SD = 13.49		

Table 6. The influence of academic and social skills on the students' marketability

Independent variables	Marketability		t	p
	B	Beta		
Academic	.359	.255	3.504*	.001
Social	.558	.539	7.398*	.000
$R^2 = 0.589$ (58.9%) and $F = 193.253^*$, $p < 0.05$				

2 Another possible reason is the lack of experience and skill by unemployed graduates. As a matter of fact, many organizations prefer to employ graduates with experience. In addition, in Malaysia, especially the private sector today is not interested in recruiting local graduates because they lack essential skills, such as proficiency in English and interpersonal skills. Therefore, the local graduates have to compete for jobs with the overseas' graduates. In recent years, however, the Malaysian government has implemented several measures to reduce the problem of unemployed graduates such as the introduction of several training programs for fresh graduates. In another measure, the Higher Education Ministry has implemented the Student Marketability Program, which set a target to secure suitable employment within six months for at least 75 per cent of new graduates.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Academic and social soft skills are only the two skills that are required by our graduates. There are many other soft skills that graduates should acquire while they are in the higher institutions. As Schulz (2008) stated that predominantly missing soft skill among graduates is communication skills, but additional knowledge in business or project management is also ranking highly on the list of missing skills desirable for graduates entering the business world. Therefore, taking into consideration of the high rate of unemployment among graduates in Malaysia, there is a need to look at the delivery system of higher learning institutions in Malaysia. They need to improve in the teaching-learning process in order to deliver generic skills that are required by graduates (Kee et al., 2012). Public and private institutions should not concentrate too much on paper qualification. They should concentrate more efforts in preparing their students to face the reality of what the job market is looking for such as the right technical skills, the right soft skills and the right attitude so that ultimately, graduates will land a job in the field that they studied.

5. Acknowledgements

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