

Exploring employers' insights on graduate employability and work readiness in the age of artificial intelligence

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Abstract

This study aims to explore Malaysian employers' insights regarding the graduate employability and work readiness of young university graduates, exploring how employability skills required by employers can be aligned with the skills taught at the university level. Moreover, the objective of this study was to examine the insight provided by employers regarding the readiness of young graduates for the workforce in Malaysia. Through a qualitative method, the data was gathered by conducting in-depth interviews with 23 employers in high-level management positions within both public and private organizations. The findings revealed that universities serve as a place where students can refine their cognitive abilities and enhance crucial skills such as communication, critical thinking, leadership, character development, and creativity. Although university graduates are not yet considered work-ready, universities have started revising courses and programs that link to practice-based knowledge to meet the industrial demand. These findings carry implications for educational institutions to understand industrial requirements, enabling students to adapt professionally and socially to workplace transformations beyond the campus environment.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), employers, graduate employability, work readiness, university graduates

INTRODUCTION

In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), the perspective of students towards universities has undergone a significant transformation. Rather than viewing universities primarily as centers for knowledge-seeking, students now approach these institutions with a heightened focus on the practical outcomes of their education (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). In simpler terms, the way people see going to university has changed a lot. It's not just about getting knowledge; now, people are thinking about what kind of job they can get after taking a certain course (Wong & Hoskins, 2022). They ask questions like, "If I study this, what job can I have? Will I be able to find a good job with this degree? How much can I earn once I finish this degree? Which companies or industries usually hire graduates with this course?" Thus, some top-notch universities enhance their reputation by sending a message to parents: for their children to have better job opportunities, they must get into these elite universities, which are seen as pathways to promising careers (Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). This shift prompts individuals to inquire about the potential career trajectories associated with specific courses, raising questions about employability and the tangible benefits of chosen programs.

As education gets more advanced, universities can no longer be complacent in their role as both creators and disseminators of knowledge. As such, universities need to adjust the institutional position and take on more proactive roles to encompass various factors such as technological advancements, the rise of social media applications, changes in the job market, and a growing emphasis on skills development (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020) especially in the time of AI invention. This could involve upgrading traditional methods of teaching and learning, incorporating innovative teaching approaches, revising the curriculum to meet current demands, and ensuring graduates are well-prepared for the complexities of the contemporary workforce (Siivonen et al., 2023). These changes demand a transformative

approach to ensure that academic program offerings align consistently with the needs of both students and the workforce, particularly in the era of artificial intelligence (AI).

Several studies highlighted “functional imperatives of the world of work,” which suggests that these educational initiatives are designed to address the specific skills and challenges within professional settings so that graduates will be more job-ready and adaptable to the practical demands of their chosen workplace (Siivonen et al., 2023; Siivonen & Filander, 2020). Their studies thus propose that higher education institutions should be increasingly incorporating courses and programs that will establish a real connection between the theoretical and the practical requirements of professional practice-based knowledge. In other words, there must be a transformation towards integrating real-world, practice-based knowledge into the academic curriculum rather than relying on the conventional way of practicing education. This approach thus will bridge the gap between learning in the classroom and the actual practices of the workforce to ensure that students are equipped not only with theoretical understanding but also with the practical skills for their future careers. In the context of this paper, the terms ‘higher education institutions’ and ‘universities’ are used interchangeably.

Previous research on the employability of graduates predominantly concentrated on individual university students and the development of their skills as an educational outcome (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; Crawford & Fink, 2019; Kakada et al., 2019; Scott & Willison, 2021). This recent study redirects its attention to employers’ viewpoints regarding employability skills and work readiness among young graduates, especially in light of the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI). The aim is to glean insights from industrial feedback, facilitating the identification of expectations crucial for aligning students with industry needs. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

1. Are the universities in Malaysia especially public universities preparing their graduates to be ‘work ready’?
2. How can the employability skills required by employers be aligned with the skills taught at the university level?

While the university’s role doesn’t entail offering technical job-specific training, emphasizing cognitive training enhances graduates’ communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills. Of particular importance is the cultivation of critical thinking abilities, empowering individuals to approach problem-solving from diverse and innovative angles, and therefore, obtaining insights from employers becomes highly important to ensure that graduates possess the skills valued in the professional landscape.

METHOD

The aim of this study is to explore employers’ viewpoints on whether the universities in Malaysia, especially public universities, have been preparing their graduates to be ‘work ready’. We have conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-three professionals from industry (both public and private sectors) to obtain their feedback. By conducting interviews, we aimed to gather rich, qualitative data (Patton, 2014) that would provide insights into the experiences and perspectives of professionals in the industry regarding the readiness of graduates from Malaysian universities for the workforce. The rationale for conducting the interviews is to obtain in-depth responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018) from those who are decision makers in hiring young graduates to explore their views towards work readiness among young graduates and specifically to answer the objectives of our study. The study employed purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 2014), with a primary focus on criterion sampling. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet specific predetermined

criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this research, the inclusion criteria targeted Malaysian employers, irrespective of gender, who possessed a minimum of 10 years of work experience and held decision-making authority in the hiring process. By utilizing criterion sampling, the researchers aimed to select participants who could provide insightful perspectives and experiences relevant to the study's objectives. This approach ensured that the chosen participants were well-positioned to offer valuable insights into the topic of interest, enhancing the richness and relevance of the data collected.

The interviews for our study took place from April 2019 to February 2020. Each interview session lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, providing ample time for in-depth discussions with participants. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, and recordings were made to capture the nuances of the conversations (Siivonen et al., 2023). The data analysis process was conducted using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. This involved a systematic approach starting with the coding process, categorizing the codes, grouping into similar characteristics, and identifying some patterns for generating themes (Friese, 2019).. By employing these rigorous analytical methods, our study ensures a robust and systematic exploration of the research questions, ultimately enhancing the validity and reliability of our findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of conducting interviews with employers was to obtain industrial views about the work readiness of university graduates in Malaysia, particularly those from public universities. This is particularly important in gaining their valuable insights to ensure the alignment between educational programs and the expectations of the workforce. Undeniably, employers serve as key stakeholders in the professional landscape, possessing a first-hand perspective on the skills and attributes they seek in potential hires (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2022). During our interview with experienced employers, we asked a couple of important questions, which were: “Based on your experience, do Malaysian universities, particularly public ones, adequately equip their graduates to be work-ready with the necessary skills?” and “How can the employability skills required by employers are aligned with the skills taught at the university level?”

The thematic analysis delves into the question of whether Malaysian universities, especially public ones, adequately prepare their graduates with the essential skills to be work-ready. Within the responses, a diverse range of perspectives emerges: while some interviewees expressed reservations about the readiness of graduates, with two respondents suggesting they were not fully prepared and two others indicating only a 70% readiness, three interviewees emphasized that students are still not adequately prepared for the workforce. Interestingly, more responses yielded differing viewpoints. The remaining interviewees held the belief that universities, particularly public ones, are indeed equipping students to be work-ready.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights a growing trend where more organizations and companies are offering internships to students. It's noteworthy that many students who participate in these internships are subsequently offered permanent or contract positions within the company. This trend indicates the evolving dynamics of university-industry interactions and the increasing importance of practical experience in the transition from academia to the workforce. Hence, the theme ‘University Preparedness for Employment’ resonates well, as ultimately, the majority of interviewees concurred that universities are indeed preparing students to enter the workforce, albeit not always to 100% (except for the three interviewees).

University Preparedness for Employment

The findings discovered several interviewees who did emphasize the role of graduates themselves in determining their success beyond university. This theme suggests that while universities provide a foundation of skills and knowledge, it is ultimately up to graduates to take responsibility for their own professional and personal development. As AI continues to shape various sectors, graduates with strong IT backgrounds are well-positioned to contribute to the development and implementation of AI solutions in the workforce. Thus, the emphasis on IT training reflects universities' efforts to prepare graduates for the evolving landscape of AI-driven industries. The excerpts were related to this theme as follows:

“I see the role of the university as providing skilled and intellectually capable students. However, it's not solely the university that determines a person's success, but rather the graduates themselves and how they prepare for the working world.” (An interview with the Council Chairman)

“I trust that universities do indeed prioritize preparing their students for this aspect. However, ultimately, it comes down to the individual student. It depends on whether they truly focus on honing their skills and adapting to the working environment.” (An interview with a bank manager)

“Yes. Even in the past, universities were not responsible for providing work opportunities or anything of the sort. People often expect universities to take on more responsibility in supporting students. This is why initiatives like the Graduates Job Market exist—to aid students and universities in finding mechanisms that benefit students.” (An interview with the senior administrative officer)

“For me, I believe that universities are indeed aligning their curriculum with the most crucial job requirements, especially evident in the internship programs they offer. However, I feel that the duration of these internships needs to be extended. A short period is often insufficient for students to fully grasp the intricacies of the role.” (An interview with the marketing manager).

Several other respondents also shared similar responses based on their experiences working with young university graduates within their respective companies and organizations:

“Some universities genuinely prepare their students for employment purposes. Indeed, universities aim for their graduates to be marketable. Some go even further by collaborating with industrial players to develop their modules. Nowadays, many current graduates are highly IT-oriented. It's evident that a significant portion of students are focused on IT, indicating that they receive thorough training in this field.” (An interview with a human resource manager)

“In my opinion, students nowadays are exposed to new technologies and have access to vast amounts of information, unlike in the past when such technology was not available. However, while information is readily accessible, experience remains crucial.” (An interview with the Head of Branch).

“Yes, I've noticed the initiatives undertaken by higher learning institutions. It's evident that today's students are well-informed. They tackle challenges fearlessly and without hesitation, demonstrating their readiness to confront

obstacles head-on. Despite being introduced to new concepts early on, they've shown their ability to compete effectively with experienced staff." (An interview with the senior corporate communication officer).

The prevalence of IT-oriented skills among current graduates, as discovered in the interviews, is closely related to the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the contemporary job market. Many students are concentrating their studies in communication technology, indicating a growing recognition of the importance of technology, including AI, in various industries. The fact that students receive thorough training in IT suggests that universities are proactively responding to the increasing demand for IT expertise, which includes knowledge and skills related to AI technologies. Overall, the message is clear: graduates bear the responsibility for their own development and should proactively pursue opportunities to enhance their skills and abilities beyond what the university curriculum provides. Addressing the second research question involves recognizing the critical importance of aligning the employability skills valued by employers with those taught at the university level to adequately prepare graduates for the workforce.

Theme 1 - Joining professional bodies

The interviewee emphasizes the significance of students affiliating with professional bodies relevant to their field of study. This theme highlights the importance of enhancing one's credentials by becoming associated with such organizations, which can provide valuable networking opportunities and industry insights. By highlighting the benefits of membership, the interviewee advocates for proactive engagement with professional bodies to bolster students' competitiveness in the job market, as expressed in the following excerpt:

"As a student, it's important to join a professional body relevant to your field of study. For instance, as a marketer, I am a member of the Malaysian marketing institution. Universities should inform students about these professional bodies and their relevance to their courses. By becoming associated with such bodies, you enhance your credentials. This, in turn, improves your CV, giving you an edge over other candidates." (Interview with the Director)

Theme 2 - Curriculum alignment with market demands

There were a couple of interviewees who stressed the important role of academicians in keeping up with the updated curriculum to align with industry demands. This theme highlights the necessity of maintaining syllabus relevance by removing outdated subjects and integrating more relevant ones. By advocating for a dynamic curriculum that reflects market trends, the interviewee underscores the importance of ensuring graduates possess skills and knowledge that meet current industry needs. The excerpts related to the curriculum alignment were as follows:

"Academicians bear the responsibility of driving and implementing changes. The syllabus should align with market demands, ensuring relevance and currency. This entails removing obsolete subjects from the course structure and replacing them with more pertinent ones." (Interview with human resource officer)

"The syllabus currently taught to PR students does not sufficiently align with the demands of the field. From my perspective, contemporary PR students need to delve deeper into information and communication technology (ICT), given the

increasing integration of ICT into PR tasks. This includes mastering skills related to managing social media platforms, creating blogs and websites, and designing visuals for various digital mediums such as Facebook, LED screens, and banners. While having a basic understanding is essential, it is insufficient to meet the evolving needs of the PR industry.” (Interview with Corporate and Public Relations Senior Officer)

Integrating information and communication technology into the curriculum should not solely focus on incorporating the latest AI-technology; it should also aim to prepare students for a future where AI is expected to become an integral part of daily life (Essien et al., 2024). This relates to curriculum alignment with market demands by acknowledging the increasing relevance of AI skills in various industries. Employers are seeking graduates who are flexible with the changes in adopting AI-related technologies and concepts (Kamaruddin et al., 2023), rather than relying on the conventional method that will lead the organizations to be left behind. By integrating AI education into the curriculum, universities can equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in an AI-driven job market, thereby aligning with the evolving demands of industries.

Theme 3 - Adapting to technological advancements

The interviewee highlights the importance of young graduates keeping up to date on technological changes to remain competitive in the job market. This theme emphasizes the importance of the young one being trained and skilled so that they can always keep up with changes in digitalisation, including online meetings and automation. By advocating for adaptability and technological proficiency, the interviewee underscores the imperative for graduates to acquire relevant skills to thrive in technology-driven work environments.

“Fresh graduates should strive to stay up-to-date with the evolving technologies. Nowadays, meetings are conducted online, and production is increasingly carried out by robots and machinery. Technology has assumed many human roles, making it essential for graduates to adapt and remain competitive in the market.” (Interview with human resource officer)

The prevalence of technology in modern workplaces, as mentioned by the interviewee, including online meetings and automation, indicates that graduates need to be well-versed in technological tools and processes to succeed in their careers. Thus, the integration of technology in education not only enhances learning experiences (Gao et al., 2024) but also prepares graduates for the technology-driven demands of the job market.

Theme 4 - Industry exposure and engagement

The last findings highlight the significance of providing students with exposure to industry professionals to prepare them for the workforce. This theme emphasizes the value of inviting industry professionals to deliver talks, speeches, and courses at universities to impart real-world insights and enhance students’ readiness for employment. By advocating for increased industry engagement, the interviewee highlights the importance of bridging the gap between academia and industry to better equip students for their future careers.

“I believe that as long as students receive exposure to professionals in the industry, they will be equipped with the necessary information to prepare them for the working world. Additionally, local universities should consider inviting more industry professionals to give talks, speeches, and courses. This initiative

would help develop the talent and readiness of students for the workforce.”
(Interview with Head of Copy)

“As an industry expert, I often collaborate with media lecturers and recognized to provide certification at registered centers. I’ve spearheaded the creation of five National Occupational Standards (NOS) in the media industry. These NOS delineate skills required across levels one to five, categorizing them based on proficiency. Through this framework, students are equipped with technological competencies corresponding to their skill level, ranging from basic usage to advanced production techniques.” (Head of Documentary and Production)

These findings highlight the critical importance of enhancing the university-industry connection (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020), particularly in light of the rise of AI and technological advancements. Firstly, the emphasis on the role of professional bodies in enhancing students’ competitiveness and credentials in the job market seems relevant to several university programs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the insights derived from data interviews with employers provide invaluable perspectives on the graduate employability and university graduate preparedness for the workforce in Malaysia, particularly those from public universities. Although higher education plays a pivotal role in equipping students with the skills and competencies required for the complex workplace (van der Baan et al., 2024); the core of these higher institutions remains the same for sharpening students’ intellectual skills and capacity for building lifelong learning. The thematic analysis reveals a nuanced landscape, with varying opinions on the adequacy of graduate readiness. While some respondents expressed hesitations, others believe that universities are effectively equipping students for the demands of the job market. The increasing prevalence of internships further accentuates the evolving dynamics of university-industry collaboration, with many students transitioning seamlessly into contract or permanent positions. Moving forward, addressing the alignment between employability skills and university education remains paramount. By refining curriculum, teaching methodologies, and industry partnerships, universities can better prepare graduates for the challenges and opportunities of today’s workforce. These findings serve as a foundation for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between academia and industry, ensuring that graduates emerge ready to thrive in their chosen fields.

Throughout history, universities have played a central role in shaping the intellectual, cultural, and social landscape of civilizations (Boulding, 1967). They serve as centers of learning where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to explore, question, and innovate across various fields of study. Universities contribute to the progression of civilization by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among students. Through education and research, universities drive advancements in science, technology, literature, philosophy, and the arts, which are foundational to the development of civilizations (Miller, 2019). Furthermore, universities serve as hubs of cultural exchange, facilitating dialogue and collaboration among people from different cultures and backgrounds (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). In summary, universities are integral to the fabric of civilization, serving as dynamic institutions that nurture knowledge, foster innovation, and cultivate the intellectual and cultural life of societies throughout history.

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