

## The Employability Skills Mastered by Fresh Graduates towards the Expectation of Employers: A Conceptual Paper

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i11/19146> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i11/19146

**Published Date:** 03-11-2023

### Abstract

The competition for graduates to get a job is tight. As there is an overabundance of academically qualified graduates entering the job market every year, employers are likely to hire the most workplace-ready candidates. Accordingly, academic excellence should come together with the soft skills method that is useful for job handling. Several employability skills have been identified which become employers' preference of suitable candidates. This paper proposes the conceptual framework towards the employability skills mastered by fresh graduates towards the expectation of employers, namely leadership skills, interpersonal skills and information technology skills. It is hoped that the proposed conceptual framework may contribute to the body of knowledge as additional references for scholars. Besides, it is hoped to significantly impact the curriculum review in the higher education institution.

**Keywords:** Employability Skills, Leadership Skills, Interpersonal skills, Information Technology Skills

### Introduction

Aligning student skills with the demand of employers has become an important dimension in tertiary education as employers put an expectation on the higher education institution to provide the students with necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) which are relevant to meet the industrial needs. The higher education institutions are concerned about meeting the labour market demands and expectations of employers (Tajuddin et al., 2022).

According to Rich (2015), employability can be defined as the ability to get, keep and succeed in jobs you want - both now and in the future as the economy shifts. The destinations of leavers from higher education statistics are often used as a measure of success for

employability, which is confusing between employment and employability (Mawson & Haworth, 2018). Employability focuses on skills acquisition that becomes a challenge to meet the employers' expectation. Regardless of what courses taken by students in universities or college, the excessive numbers of graduates produced are highly competitive.

Although a number of studies on graduate job readiness have been conducted, there is still an argument that the inability of higher education institutions to prepare graduates for employment (Tajuddin *et al.*, 2022). As Malaysia is moving towards the Fifth Industrial Revolution, modern undergraduate education is no longer a viable form of education mainly for work and career prospects, but generic soft skills become an important skill for entering the labour market. Therefore, this study will look into the employability skills, demanded by employers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Employability skills**

According to Tajuddin *et al* (2022), employability skills are transferable skills that a person possesses in order to carry out the necessary job and meet the changing demands of employers. Meanwhile, graduates perceived the employability skills as the ability to shift from being technical oriented to soft skills growth (Teng *et al.*, 2019). The enhancement of employability skills is likely to vary across students, depending on the specific circumstances, the course programme taken, as well as individual characteristics (Belderbos, 2019). The educational institutions can better prepare adequate skills and review the existing programme structure by having a dialogue between academia and industry to meet the industrial demand (Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012).

It is believed that information on employability skills would be more relevant after gaining and considering the input from employers who are involved in the recruiting decision. Several dimensions of employability skills have been identified as follows: (1) basic literacy and numeracy skills; (2) critical thinking skills; (3) management skills; (4) leadership skills; (5) interpersonal skills; (6) information technology skills; (7) systems thinking skills; (8) work ethic disposition; (9) oral and written communication; (10) teamwork; (11) conflict management; (12) responsibility; (13) decision-making; and (14) problem-solving skills (Hart Research Associates, 2013; Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012; Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015).

### **Leadership skills**

Studies revealed that organizations are seeking potential employees with leadership skills to help achieve organizational goals (Tajuddin *et al.*, 2022). Besides, a candidate who possesses leadership skills is an effective communicator which leads to better performance. Due to the function of a leader as a role model, possessing leadership skills promote and perpetuate cultural values that encourage a supportive attitude towards change, implement appropriate governance and organizational structures and provide opportunities for employees to work with them (Klus & Muller, 2020).

Klus and Muller (2020) suggested employers re-evaluate what leadership skills should be highlighted when creating job advertisements for different positions and levels. Guzman *et al* (2020) emphasized that future leaders should possess leadership skills as they play an important role to meet the strategic decisions at all levels of the organization. Furthermore,

great leaders can adapt in an agile environment, operating at a systemic level and following the uncertainty of the revolution in industry.

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Many of the skills found to be relevant for social interactions at work. Research has shown that personal attributes, which is interpersonal skills affect cooperative actions in organizations (Dierdorff et al., 2021). Interpersonal skills have been described as proficiencies for “social sensitivity, relationship building, working with others, listening and communication (Lievens & Sackett, 2012). Although there is a limited amount of empirical research on interpersonal skills towards employment, evidence does suggest that interpersonal skills are positively related with interpersonal facilitation and job dedication (Dierdorff et al., 2021). The nature of organizations requires graduates to possess interpersonal capabilities as there is an interdependent working relationship, where a person’s performance is reciprocally linked to another person’s performance.

### **Information Technology (IT) Skills**

Digital skills and access have become even more essential in navigating almost every aspect of life, including the job aspect (Hecker, Spaulding and Kuehn, 2021; Parry & Strohmeier, 2014). In the twenty-first century, “technological change” has taken place as the world is becoming globally connected and digital skills are in high demand among fresh graduates (Tajuddin *et al.*, 2022). The emerging technologies including machine learning, artificial intelligence, drones, robotics and autonomous vehicles have altered the way people live and work. Laar et al (2020) believed that information and communication technology (ICT) is pervasive in the workplace and there is a high demand for ICT-proficient employees. Undeniably, the rapid changes in the use of the latest technology and demands from employers has made today’s job market become more challenging (Tajuddin *et al.*, 2022; Bejakovic & Mrnjavac, 2020). Therefore, the expansion of online education and training and employer demand for digital skills become essential.

Studies have shown that employers are more likely to hire candidates who possess digital skills and are in high demand (Tajuddin *et al.*, 2022). ICT is especially useful when teams must share information and make decisions across business and national boundaries (Wang, 2010). Employees therefore need the skills to connect and collaborate with others beyond the boundaries. In today’s knowledge society, employees are expected to be able to instantaneously interchange ideas, information and experiences (Laar *et al.*, 2020). Gratton (2016) found that many people use digital technologies more often in their everyday life compared to at work, and they associate positive technology-related influences with their daily lives rather than with their work.

**Conceptual Framework for Employability Skills of Fresh Graduates**

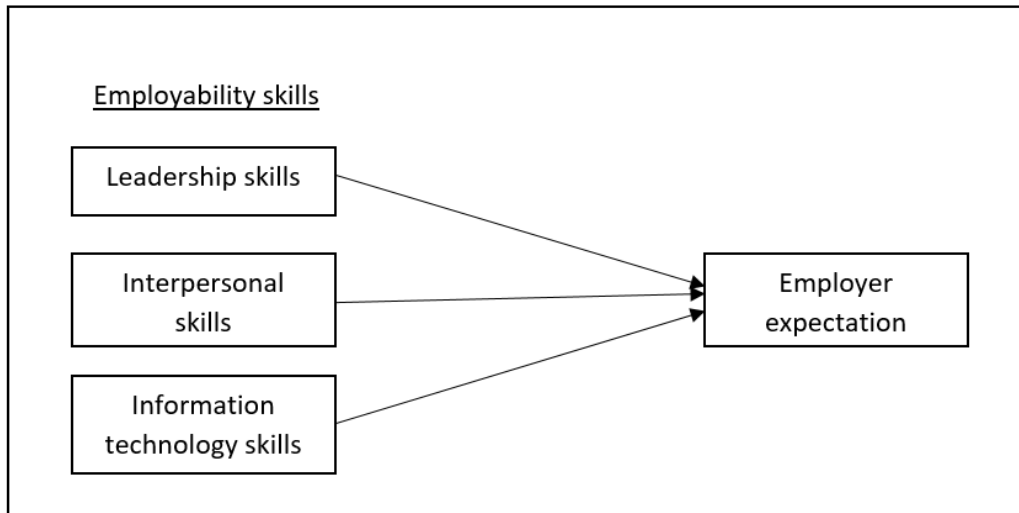


Figure 1.0: The proposed conceptual framework

**Conclusion**

This study conceptually proposed the employability skills; which including leadership skills, interpersonal skills and information technology skills may affect the employer’s decision in hiring potential employees. The proposed variables influence employers in considering candidates with good soft skills and update with the latest trend of business activity. Besides, the proposed framework is intended to assist the educational sector, particularly tertiary education in gaining useful insight and review the curriculum design, according to the labour market demand. Therefore, future researchers are urged to carry out an empirical study by using the proposed framework.

**Acknowledgement**

All authors equally contributed to the conceptual and the design of the study. We would like to express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for the useful suggestions.

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