



Employability Skills Needed for TVET Graduates in Malaysia: Perspective of Industry Expert

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Abstract: Employability skills are a very significant attribute especially to TVET graduates as it is closely related to career readiness. Nevertheless, many studies have found the gap between TVET graduates' employability skills with industry needs. Their study found that industries need TVET graduates who possess communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving and entrepreneurial skills. However, many studies have found that TVET graduates have problems communicating effectively and lack of self-confidence. Therefore, this qualitative study was conducted to identify the employability skills required by the industry through the perspective of industry experts themselves. The findings of the study found that employability skills needed for TVET graduates are social and communication, technological literacy, teamwork and leadership. Therefore, stakeholders in TVET need to pay attention to this matter by producing TVET graduates who possess employability as required by the industry. Concurrently, the success of this collaboration depends on the strategic and tactical approaches made by TVET institutions and industries.

Keywords: TVET, employability skills, TVET graduates, industry needs

1. Introduction

Graduates' employability skills have been a concern to the world of higher education as it affects the marketability of graduates. The term employability has been defined by various authors based on their studies, for example; Lankard (1990) defines graduates' employability skills as having academic competencies and at the same time having other skills such as personality, interpersonal skills as well as possessing good attitudes and behaviours. A later study by Fugate et al., (2004) defines employability skills as the act of preparing graduates to successfully secure jobs and progress in their career route by proving their worth to their employers as a key factor to their survival on the job. Meanwhile, Ahmad Esa (2006) defines employability skills as communication skills, analytical skills, information management skill, technology literate, team work and leadership. A recent study by Kamerade and Paine (2015) conversely interpret employability skills must involve individual qualities required by employers. Therefore, Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) plays a significant role in providing graduates with the employability skills needed by the industry.

In a study conducted by the Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA) in 2018 revealed that there is a need to create an appropriate and relevant education system in producing competitive and resilient TVET graduates. The study found that TVET graduates have weaknesses related to employability skills such as teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, leadership and communication skills. As such, efforts to empower TVET are seen to be somewhat stunted as TVET graduates are not yet fully prepared with adequate skills, competitiveness and

entrepreneurial characteristics to explore new opportunities which in turn change the landscape from job searching to job creating.

In Malaysia, TVET is an education programme that aim to produce skilled graduates that meet the current industrial needs. Zool Hilmi and Mohamad Sattar (2014) states that the outcomes of a highly skilled workforce can be achieved through optimal industry involvement in TVET system. Ramlee (2017) also added that the Malaysian TVET system needs to focus on increasing its attractiveness to prospective students, providers and industry players, in addition to increase the quality of TVET instructors. Therefore, a strategic collaboration between TVET institutions and industries needs to be executed in order to identify the employability skills that need to be instilled to TVET graduates (Yusof et al., 2017).

Employability skills is also closely related to career readiness. Lombardi, et al., (2012) define career readiness as the knowledge, skills and learning strategies that provide outcomes to individuals including readiness to work, undergoing on-job-training and the impact of workplace behaviour. Meanwhile, Noor Mala and Azman (2019) define career readiness as the readiness of an individual to venture into a chosen career field. Mat Yazid (2010) emphasizes that the graduate job market no longer depends solely on academic excellence, but the quality of employability skills can affect their marketability. Therefore, it is the responsibility of TVET institutions to ensure that graduates are prepared to enter the field of employment by possessing skills in their respective fields and having the required employability skills.

Nevertheless, many studies have found that there is a gap between the employability skills of graduates and the skills required by the industry. In a study conducted by Azah Mohamed et al. (2007), Mustafa, et al., (2010) and Zafir et al., (2015) found that there are skills gaps or weaknesses of graduates related to these employability skills. Their study found that industries need TVET graduates who possess communication skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving and entrepreneurial skills. In a study conducted by Zafir et al., (2015) also found that a relatively large skill gap expressed by employers is related to graduate performance in terms of ethics and values, thinking skills, leadership, decision making and problem solving. Meanwhile the study of Shafarizan et al., (2019) suggested that the employability skills of graduates can meet the needs of the current industry through more effective TVET curriculum planning.

TVET institutions and industries need to align their common aims, based on sharing knowledge, learning and intensifying collaboration. This is because the success of the Malaysia's TVET ecosystem depends on close collaboration and industry-driven initiatives, including of technology and knowledge sharing, practical experience, intensive trainings for both instructors and students (Aminuddin 2011). Simultaneously, the success of this collaboration depends on the strategic and tactical approaches made by TVET institutions and industries as joint venture partners (Zool Hilmi & Mohamad Sattar, 2014). Thus, there is no doubt that a strategic collaboration between TVET institutions and industries is significant to be implemented as it produces mutual benefit.

To understand the employability skills required, it is vitally significant to obtain the input from the industry perspective. This is because, an accurate and in-depth input will help stakeholders to prepare TVET graduates that meet the needs of the industry in the future. Therefore, this paper focuses on data from the industry itself related to their requirement of employability skills. The research question is: What are the employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia?

2. Literature Review

The employability skills gap between industry needs and graduate competencies has been a long-standing discussion. According to Rehman and Mehmood (2014), there is a gap exist between the industries' requirement and the quality of graduates produced by learning institutions. Instead of pursuing the normal job routines, some of the crucial employability skills needed by the industries are problem solving, critical thinking, able to communicate effectively and able to work in team. Rao and Sivasree (2015) support this statement by stating that the industry needs individuals who possess good employability skills where they are considered vital since employees are actually an asset of an industry. This is because the individual attributes will affect the success or failure of the operation of the respective industry.

As a developing country, Malaysia is actively empowering the TVET system to meet the needs of numerous industries. However, TVET institutions in Malaysia still facing the issue of bridging the employability skills gap as required by the industry. In a study conducted by Esa (2013) found that the career readiness among TVET graduates is low and they had difficulty to communicate effectively. Whereas a study by Lucas et al., (2017) found that most TVET graduates in Malaysia have good technical skills, but there are shortcomings related to employability skills such as social skills which refers to weakness in communication, low self-esteem, and difficult to adapt themselves in the workplace. Therefore, immediate initiatives need to be taken to bridge the gaps that exist thus producing competitive and holistic TVET graduates.

3. Methodology

This study will use qualitative methodology in the process of obtaining input to be used as research findings. Creswell (2012) defines qualitative research as a process of inquiry into the direction of understanding based on the data collection methods used when reviewing a social problem. This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach and uses an inductive approach to understand the context of various industries from the experiences of the experts involved in training interns and fresh graduates.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the experts' range of experience and knowledge would provide rich insights into the need to improve the quality of education. Consequently, in this study, the data has been collected through in-depth interviews and social interactions with industry experts to determine their observations, knowledge, experience and opinions on the employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia.

3.1 Participants

The participants involved in this study were experts from various industries in Malaysia and were identified based on the following criteria:

- A minimum of 10 years working experience in a particular industry
- Possess a diploma or degree or professional certification in related industry
- Experience of supervising interns or fresh TVET graduates

3.2 Instruments

A Semi-structured interview protocol was constructed to guide the in-depth interview sessions with industry experts. According to Montoya (2016), questions in a semi-structured interview allow participants to respond flexibly. The largest part of the interview was guided by a list of questions related to the employability skills needed for TVET graduates by industries in Malaysia. Neither the exact wording nor the sequence of the questions was determined ahead of time.

According to Montoya (2016), this method allows the researcher to respond to views as they evolve during the course of an interview, and at the same time it gives space for new ideas on the topics discussed. Simultaneously, it gives the researcher scope to construct new questions spontaneously to ensure the richness of the data. The interview protocols in this study were validated by two experts with PhD qualifications in educational policy and education management at higher learning institutions.

3.3 Procedure of Data Collection

Participants in this study were identified by the human resources departments of their respective organizations based on the criteria as suggested. They are six participants involved in this study and they were then contacted via email to arrange one-to-one interviews through Google Meet. With their consent, all of the interviews were recorded. Semi-structured interview protocol was used as a reference to guide the process of the interview sessions to ensure that participants provided unbiased and independent opinions.

3.4 Procedure of Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to evaluate the data gathered from the interviews. All of the interviews were transcribed and coded to identify the employability skills needed for TVET graduates by industries in Malaysia. Participants were asked to verify the transcripts before researchers began compiling, coding and categorizing the data to form the theme of the study. Data was then categorized according to the emerging theme by using ATLAS.ti version 8. Having processed all of the data and identified the emergent themes, researchers prepared a set of expert consent forms.

3.5 Validity and Reliability of the Study

Cohen (1960) has introduced a method for determining the reliability of qualitative data in the form of interviews in which the procedure indicates that there are two (or more) evaluators independently categorizing unit samples and determining the level, importance, and stability of their consent sampling. The Cohen Kappa Index analysis was performed to find the degree of alignment of the analysis unit with the constructed theme. Therefore, to ensure the reliability of this study, three qualitative experts in the field of TVET were appointed to be the evaluators of the constructed themes.

4. Findings

In identifying the employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia, four themes were developed from the data collected and shown in the Figure 1 below:

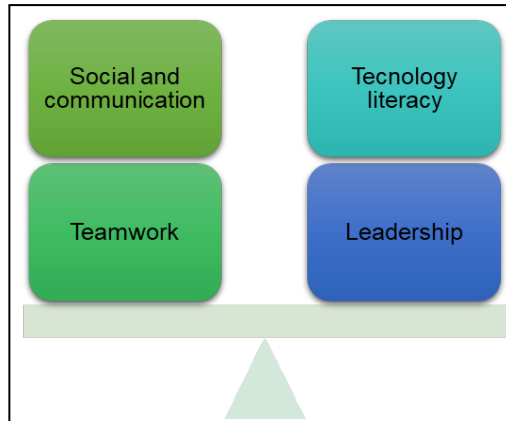


Fig. 1 - The employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia

4.1 Profile of Participants

This study interviewed six industry experts, each from a different specialist field, three from international companies and three from local ones. All experts had at least ten years of experience supervising fresh graduates and internship students. Four of the experts had previously participated in TVET town hall sessions on several occasions. Pseudonyms were used as the protection of participants’ anonymity.

Table 1 - Profile of industry experts

Pseudonyms	Company	Sector	Years of Experience	Position
Mr Iqbal	A	Electrical and Electronics (E&E)	13	Project Supervisor
Mr. Habieb	E	Automotive	10	Technician Supervisor
Mrs. Zahraa	C	Fashion Technology	31	Managing Director
Mr. Izzaz	D	Hospitality and Culinary	11	Sous Chef
Mr. Hamka	E	Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC)	34	Senior Manager, Dept. Of Research and Development
Mrs. Deena	F	Beauty and Spa therapy	15	Managing Director

4.2 Social and Communication

According to the industry experts, TVET graduates possess good technical skills. However, they are lack of good communication skills, especially when dealing with customers or clients:

“These TVET students... they have good hard skills but their ability to interact, to communicate is very weak. For me, their technical competency is acceptable, but when they are interacting with the boss or with customers, their communication skills and public relations... are weak. Their body language is also inappropriate, for instance, you can't play with your mobile phone when you go for lunch with clients!” (Mr. Iqbal)

Aside from academic qualifications and competencies in their fields, the industry experts expect their employees to have good social skills and to be able to mingle well with others:

“We need our employees to be more than good academics. We want them to have good social skills, to be able to carry themselves, mix with other people, and get along well.” (Mr. Hamka)

In the world of fashion, we need to socialize well. The employees we want not only need to be competent but they must be able to impress customers with their speaking abilities. Plus we need them to be presentable at all times. Not only their appearance but also their speaking skills. The body language and facial expression are also important to attract customers and profitable prospects. (Mrs. Zahraa)

Apart from communicating informally, the ability to communicate formally such as making presentations is also a skill that TVET graduates need:

“Some TVET graduates lack (oral) presentation skills, they just read what is written on screen. We want them to be able to deliver information effectively.” (Mrs. Deena)

“As a member in R&D team, presentation is unavoidable. Once we come to a finding, we must provide the results to the upper management. Most of TVET graduates in our team are lack of self confidence in presentation. Sometimes it is because of language barrier, but most of the time because they just don't have the skills. So, for me... it is crucial for them to develop this presentation skills. Their achievements are heavily evaluated based on these abilities.” (Mr. Hamka)

4.3 Technology Literacy

Other than possess skills in their respective fields, TVET graduates need to have additional packages such as computer literacy and technology skills. Industry experts think that TVET graduates need to master these skills in order to make themselves relevant to the market:

“Now is the age of technology. We are heading towards IR 4.0 and... much of our equipment is advanced and digitalised, and it requires technological skills. Sometimes we have to do programming, so we need all those skills.” (Mr. Habieb)

At the same time, TVET graduates are expected to have good computer literacy, to be capable of data entry, data management and other processes:

“TVET students must have extra skills, especially computer skills. These computer skills are necessary for documentation, recording and filing. We sometimes need to use computers to control production systems. The ability to use multiple applications is also necessary.” (Mr. Hamka)

These skills are related to technical communication and are necessary for tasks such as reporting and communicating accurately. Most new TVET graduates are lack of this technology literacy and data management. There is a need for computer courses for TVET students.

“Based on my experience, most of TVET graduates are competence when it comes to hands-on... I have no doubt of that. However, I have to admit that many of them are weak in the use of computers. They are not even capable of using basic Office Windows. They need computer classes to prepare them for entering the workplace. If not, maybe this can be integrated in their learning” (Mrs. Deena)

4.4 Teamwork

Teamwork was an emergent theme from the data. The industry experts considered communications within the team as essential in order to achieve company goals. Failing to convey exact messages to their team might slow down productivity and increase miscommunication. Therefore, each employee is accountable to other team members:

“Teamwork is very important in achieving set goals. I think the college should create a special syllabus or module to improve the communication skills of TVET graduates. It's crucial to have good teamwork while working with us. They need to learn how to work in groups effectively.”(Mr. Iqbal)

As departments or units are interconnected, team communication in their regular jobs is seen as vital by the industry experts. The team ethic presents a challenge to most TVET graduates:

“In the HVAC industry, teamwork is very important. If you prefer working individually, this industry is not for you. I want TVET graduates who enter the industry to be able to communicate as a group. We can't accept losses just because there are team members who can't work together.” (Mr. Hamka)

Teamwork is particularly important to achieve common goals in the hospitality field:

“From what I see, communication skills are very important. This includes strong teamwork. Industries like ours need strong communication to achieve daily targets. Teamwork is a priority in the hospitality and culinary fields.” (Mr. Izzaz)

4.5 Leadership

Leadership skills are significant in preparing graduates for employability. This is another theme to emerge from the analysis. For instance, technicians, mechanics or foremen in the automotive industry will not remain in the same position until the end of their careers. As their years of service increase, they gain more experience, explore different areas and can be promoted to higher levels:

“I see a lot of intern TVET students here who are quite introverted. They don't want to stand out. As they become more senior, they may have the opportunity to be promoted, but only if they have developed good leadership skills. Everyone starts at the bottom, but it shouldn't end there.” (Mr. Habieb)

Career advancement opportunities in the industry are open to those with leadership qualities. Therefore, industry expects TVET graduates to have the ability to lead a team in order to achieve company goals.

“Industry definitely needs great teamwork. We need to work together. But how do we have a great team? It is because we have a great leader who can solve problems immediately and work smartly as a team. Being a great industry worker requires not only technical skills, but essential leadership skills. Most fresh graduates do not yet have these leadership skills. But I am sure it can be taught indirectly during the course of their studies. It will benefit them in the future.” (Mr. Iqbal)

5. Discussions

The key finding found in the data is that one of the employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia is social and communication skills. According to the industry experts, it needs to be addressed quickly as they identified weak social and communications skills among TVET graduates still lingering. A similar research by Dwiyanti et al. (2021) suggested that students who aim to work in the logistics industry should develop their social and communication skills accordingly such as negotiating skills, oral communication, presentation skills, critical thinking skills, time management, managing stress and teamwork. Thus, more activities to develop graduates' employability skills should be implemented at campus level (Norazman et al., 2017).

Moreover, TVET graduates should have the ability to prioritise and to be comfortable with change (Wagner 2020 in Dwiyanti 2021). In the article, it was noted that most of the skills needed by TVET graduates in Indonesia are employability skills that cannot be prepared in a short space of time, therefore TVET institutions must optimise collaboration between logistics industries with technological solutions for learning activities.

According to industry experts, social skills are also significant for TVET graduates. The experts highlighted that poor social skills resulted in poor customer service. This is consistent with the findings of Krishnan et al. (2019) which showed that graduates' poor communication skills affected their quality in handling customers. Good social skills and public relations skills in dealing with customers are absolutely vital and will be beneficial to the company. The experts also suggested refining competency assessments for TVET graduates to take a more holistic view of their real talents.

Another key finding derived from the data is that TVET graduates need to develop their literacy in technology. Along with the advancement of technology and the 4.0 industry revolution, TVET graduates need to learn technological knowledge including the basics of computers. This finding is supported by Ahmad Esa (2006) who states that TVET graduates should be technology literate and possess skills such as information management skill, team work and leadership in order to compete in the job market.

Other than that, teamwork and leadership are also identified as the employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia by the industry experts. They emphasized that teamwork is a significant attribute in achieving the company's goals. At the same time, they claimed that most of TVET graduates lack self-confidence in leadership. In a study conducted by Zafir et al., (2015) also found that a relatively large skill gap expressed by employers is related to graduate performance in terms of ethics and values, thinking skills, leadership, decision making and problem solving.

In another research by Azah et al., (2007) found that TVET graduates with excellent employability skills such as the ability to work on their own with minimal supervision, who are technologically adept and possess leadership qualities, are more likely to find a job in a shorter period of time. Consequently, it is the responsibility of TVET institutions and TVET graduates themselves to prepare the employability skills needed by the industry which are social and communication, technology literacy, teamwork and leadership.

6. Conclusion

This study has emphasised the employability skills needed for TVET graduates in Malaysia through industry experts' perspective. Their experience of accommodating TVET students and graduates as interns and employees will help to produce better quality graduates in the future. Essentially, collaboration with industry is not just about providing employment opportunities, but is a key factor in providing quality skilled workers. This is because, in order to achieve an effective and competitive TVET ecosystem, industry involvement in identifying employability skills needed for TVET graduates is imperative. Subsequently, the initiative like strategic industry collaborations. Between TVET institutions and industries need to be done by implementing attachment programmes such as traineeships or on-job-training to develop TVET graduates' employability skills.

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