

Perceptions of Employability Skills for Youth Employment: A Comparative Study between Youth and Employers in Malaysia

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Abstract: This paper addresses the pressing issue of youth unemployment in Malaysia and the mismatch between their skills and employers' demands. The study aims to explore how both youth and employers perceive the importance of employability skills crucial for youth to secure employment. The research is driven by the growing recognition that youth employability skills are pivotal for successful workforce integration. The study employed quantitative methods and collected data through cross-sectional surveys from youth (aged 18-30) and employers in Batu Pahat, Johor. The findings revealed that youth participants emphasize a diverse range of employability skills, with Personal Quality Skills ranking highest, followed by Resource and Capability Skills, Information Skills, Basic Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Thinking Skills, and System and Technology Skills. Employers, on the other hand, rated Basic Skills as the most essential, followed by Personal Quality Skills, Resource and Capability Skills, Thinking Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Information Skills, and System and Technology Skills. The findings underscore the importance of a strong skill set for youth employability, emphasizing the need for aligning education with industry demands and fostering relevant skills to enhance job prospects. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the critical role of employability skills in addressing youth unemployment challenges and bridging the gap between industry expectations and young job seekers' skills.

Keywords: Employability Skills, Youth Unemployment, Employer's Perception, Youth's Perception

1. Introduction

According to the Statistics of Labor Force, Malaysia, Fourth Quarter and December 2022, Malaysia's unemployment rate remained steady at 3.6% in December 2022. The number of unemployed individuals also decreased slightly from 600,900 persons in November 2022 to 599,600 persons in December 2022 (TheStar, 2023). According to the International Labour Organization (2023), the global unemployment rate is expected to increase slightly in 2023 by approximately 3 million, resulting in a total of 208 million unemployed people worldwide, equivalent to a 5.8% unemployment rate. This increase is mostly due to a shortage of available workers in developed countries, and it represents a shift from the downward trend in global unemployment that occurred from 2020 to 2022.

In the 21st century, the youth demographic in Malaysia, aged 15 to 30, represents a substantial portion of the population and plays a vital role in the nation's future development (Malaysian Youth Policy, 2015). However, this group has been grappling with high unemployment rates, exacerbated by factors like the COVID-19 pandemic and a mismatch between the skills possessed by graduates and those demanded by employers. Statistics from the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) show that a significant number of youths lost their jobs due to the pandemic, with unemployment rates varying across educational levels (IYRES, 2020a; 2020b). The ramifications of youth unemployment extend beyond the individual, affecting economic growth, consumer demand, and social issues (Reddy, 2019; Rohanai *et al.*, 2020). Overcoming this challenge necessitates equipping youth with practical skills and attributes that enhance their employability, going beyond traditional education. A study highlights that employers prioritize communication, interpersonal skills, work experience, and commitment during the hiring process (Shakur *et al.*, 2020). Addressing the gap between youth skills and employer requirements is crucial, and efforts should focus on fostering essential employability skills to mitigate the adverse impacts of unemployment.

The issue of high youth unemployment in Malaysia, particularly concerning the mismatch between graduates' skills and employers' demands, has persisted, underscored by a substantial number of unemployed youths actively seeking jobs. The situation's intensity is supported by statistics from the Institute for Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA), indicating that a significant percentage of youth applicants are unemployed despite a considerable number of job vacancies (ILMIA, 2017). The mismatch issue is attributed to a discrepancy in perceptions of employability skills between employers and youth. To address this challenge, interventions should encompass modifying higher education curricula to align with industry needs, fostering awareness of essential employability skills, and providing soft skills training. Ultimately, a comprehensive understanding of the differing perceptions between employers and youth regarding employability skills is critical to bridging this gap and creating better opportunities for gainful employment.

Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to assess how employers and young individuals perceive the employability skills necessary for youth to secure employment. The structure of this paper comprises distinct sections: Section 2.0 delves into an exploration of pertinent literature regarding employability skills, alongside an examination of how both employers and youth view these skills. Section 3.0 provides an elucidation of the research methodology employed. Subsequently, the ensuing section deliberates upon the research findings. Lastly, the paper concludes by presenting its final remarks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Employability Skills

The concept of employability skills in developed countries such as Australia and Canada, has become a blueprint for developing countries such as Singapore and Malaysia; as it is related to the economic development of the nation (Alrifai & Raju, 2019). Key competencies, core skills, generic skills, and key qualifications are among the concepts related to employability skills (Naanda, 2010;

Sung *et al.*, 2013; Matters & Curtis, 2008). Hillage and Pollard (1998) described employability as about three definitions which are gaining initial employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required. Lefresne (1999) defined employability skills as the ability of individuals to find a job or emerge from unemployment in a period. Employability skills are very important, to adapt to changes in the work environment as well as retain on current job, reducing the unemployment prospects of a person (Naanda, 2010). Mohamad Zuber *et al.* (2020) defined employability skills as the skills that are needed by job seekers to be in the state of “job readiness” and at the same time prepare themselves to become competent and competitive workers in the job market.

2.2 Concept of Employability Skills

The concept of employability skills, encompassing both soft and hard skills, has been influenced by developed countries like Australia and Canada and serves as a model for developing nations such as Singapore and Malaysia in their pursuit of economic advancement (Alrifai & Raju, 2019). Employability skills refer to a combination of aptitudes and competencies essential for employment, where soft skills like teamwork and hard skills like resume creation are crucial (Benjamin *et al.*, 2013). Employability has been defined in various ways: as the capacity to secure, maintain, and transition between jobs (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Lefresne, 1999); adapting to workplace changes and reducing unemployment prospects (Naanda, 2010); and achieving job readiness and competitiveness (Mohamad Zuber *et al.*, 2020). In the United States, the SCANS Commission (1991) categorized employability skills into fundamental skills (basic skills, thinking skills, personal qualities) and workplace competencies (resources, interpersonal, information, system, technology). Similarly, Australia's Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia (2002) identified eight key competencies, while the UK emphasizes core skills of communication, numeracy, and IT, expanding to include working with others, self-improvement, and problem-solving (Turner, 2002). Common themes in these studies highlight skills like communication, problem-solving, learning, organization, and technology as vital for employability. Figure 1 illustrates the employability skills that have been mentioned. These skills collectively contribute to an individual's employability and readiness for success in the dynamic job market of the 21st century.

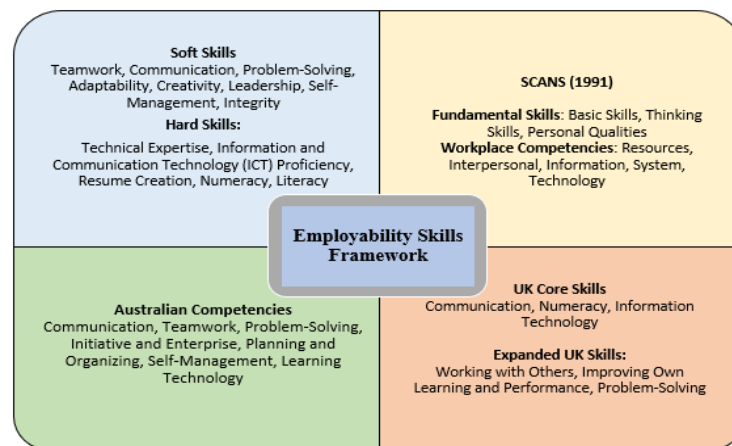


Figure 1: Employability skills

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the individual factors, labor market factors, and organizational factors that will affect the chances of employability. Employment and job market demands are not only based on the highly successful outcome of discipline-specific study programmes or professional studies but also the abilities to promote wider skills such as communication, problem-solving, and interactive skills; that will show initiative and efficiency.

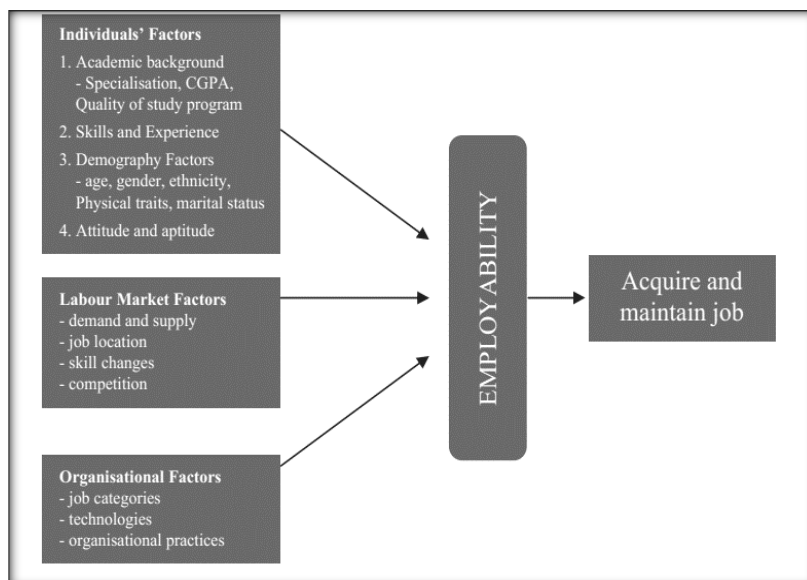


Figure 2: Factors of employability (Nooriah & Zakiyah, 2017)

2.3 Employability Skills in the 21st Century

The concept of employability skills has evolved in the 21st century, driven by factors such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and technological advancements, prompting changes in the job market and skills required (Naanda, 2010). Fitriehara *et al.* (2009) highlight qualities like self-awareness, competitiveness, creativity, and innovation as crucial attributes for individuals to navigate the challenges of globalization. Current research underscores that the modern job market demands a diverse skill set including knowledge, technical expertise, ICT proficiency, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, leadership, professionalism, and ethics (Nazrona *et al.*, 2017; Munohsamy, 2015). Graduates are advised to possess basic, thinking, resource, information, interpersonal, system, technology, and personal quality skills to enhance employability (Fitriehara *et al.*, 2009). This is supported by Rahim and Ivan (2007), who emphasize the uniqueness brought by a diverse skill set. Yuzainee *et al.* (2011) assert that dynamic changes in the Malaysian economy require communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and teamwork skills. Alrifai and Raju (2019) further stress the significance of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills in a competitive job market. Through a comparison of employability skills practiced before and after the 21st century, this study concludes that key employability skills for Malaysian youth facing uncertainties include basic, thinking, personal quality, resource, interpersonal, information, system, and technology skills (adapted from SCANS, 1991).

(a) Set of Employability Skills based on Malaysian Context

In the 21st century, the world facing massive changes such as Industrial Revolution 4.0 that lead to automation and technology advancement. The job market also changes rapidly in terms of human capital, recruitment, and employment. Employability skills can be defined as the skills that are needed by job seekers to be in the state of “job readiness” and at the same time prepare themselves to become competent and competitive workers in the job market (Mohamad Zuber *et al.*, 2020). Thus, based on Table 1, in this present study, after referring to the review from past studies, the employability skills that are relevant to youth facing the unstable economic landscape nowadays are basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, resource or capability skills, interpersonal skills, information skills and also system and technology skills. Based on Table 2, the importance of each skill in the employability

skill set is significant for youth to get employed and sustain in their current job and grow in their career in the future.

Table 1: Set of employability skills based on Malaysian context

No.	Authors	Set of Employability Skills
1.	Rahim and Ivan (2007)	Basic skills Thinking skills Personal quality skills Resource & capability skills Interpersonal skills Information skills System & technology skills
2.	Fitrihara <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Basic skills Thinking skills Personal quality skills Resource & capability skills Interpersonal skills Information skills System & technology skills
3.	Dania <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Basic skills Thinking skills Personal quality skills Resource & capability skills Interpersonal skills Information skills System & technology skills
4.	Hamid <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Interpersonal Skills Computing Skills Enterprise and Entrepreneurial Skills Communication Skills Thinking Skills Management Skills
5.	Rahmat <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Communication Skills Personal Qualities Teamwork Skills Critical Thinking Problem Solving Technology Skills Organizational Skills Continuous Learning
6.	Adnan <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Communication Skills Critical Thinking Problem Solving Teamwork Information Management Lifelong Learning Entrepreneurship Ethics and Professionalism Leadership
7.	Hossain <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Working Skills English Language Communication Skills Problem Solving Skills Leadership Skills

Table 2: Importance of employability skills based on previous studies

No.	Employability Skills	Author	Elaborations
1.	Basic Skills	Di Gregorio <i>et al.</i> (2019) Winterton and Turner (2019)	Basic soft skills are more valued by employers and are an important predictor of employability. Basic skills of literacy and numeracy, speaking and listening are among the skills that considered to be 'job-readiness skills' by most of the studies in the United States of America. Without the ability to read a diverse set of materials, workers cannot locate the descriptive and quantitative information needed to make decisions or to recommend courses of action.
2.	Thinking Skills	Winterton and Turner (2019)	Facing the global changes in terms of working skills, higher order thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and learning to learn. Thinks creatively, makes decisions, solves problems, visualizes, knows how to learn, and reasons are among the skills included in thinking skills that are rated as crucial by the employers in selecting candidates to hire.
3.	Personal Quality Skills	Prikshat <i>et al.</i> (2019) Winterton and Turner (2019)	The importance attached to personality traits by employers as an indicator of future performance, contributions and career success. Personal characteristics and attitudes such as self-esteem, motivation and willingness to take responsibility in an individuals may give high potential for them to get hired.
4.	Resource and capability skills	Misra & Khurana (2018)	The resourceful skill has emerged differentially between the student and employer where they have different perception which indeed is required for being successful in workplace and life ahead. Employers' rated this skill higher than the ratings given by the students. Thus, the candidates need to build this skill to become successful in gaining employment.
5.	Interpersonal skills	Winterton and Turner (2019)	Concerning the implications for future workforce skills of changes in the world of work, it is important to have interpersonal and team-working skills including, in various proportions, conflict resolution, leadership skills and also the ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds
6.	Information skills	Prikshat <i>et al.</i> (2019) Jewell <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Gradual decline in the number of skilled and semi-skilled workers in favour of the specialised workforce that is competent in IT and informatics. Information skill is a critical factor in competitive workplaces; therefore, the ability to evaluate information is the most valuable skills. Gathering information for problem-solving is close to a real situation in the working environment, thus engaging students in more profound and active learning opportunities.

	Picatoste <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Importance of the promotion of self-learning environments as well as the long-life learning in ICTs to increase youth employability.
7. System and technology skills	Di Gregorio <i>et al.</i> (2019)	The rapid growth of the Internet and the digitisation of marketing relationships had stimulated businesses to reconfigure their marketing strategies.
	Valdés <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Technology literacy is essential, and it is crucial to have a wide range of skills and knowledge of digital tools, especially ones related to communication

2.4 Employers' Perception on Employability Skills

Employers wield significant influence over an organization's future performance by shaping their recruitment decisions. Mansor *et al.* (2014) highlight that companies seek to enhance organizational outcomes by opening job vacancies to attract and hire the most competent candidates. A candidate's state of "work readiness" and possession of employability skills are crucial from an employer's perspective, with Kenayathulla *et al.* (2019) noting that employers often seek specific skill sets that align with job requirements. Faizah (2005) emphasizes the importance of youth understanding the significance of employability skills and their practical relevance to the working environment. Additionally, Kaur *et al.* (2008) reveal that higher-ranking employers expect candidates to possess skills aligned with the organization's needs based on their industry expertise. Murugan and Sujatha (2020) identify a range of desired skills among employers, including basic skills, communication, computing, technology proficiency, stress management, conflict resolution, empathy, and academic knowledge. The implications of poor recruitment decisions are underscored by Johri (2005), who stresses that subpar employment quality can lead to reduced morale, productivity, higher turnover, increased recruitment costs, and workplace accidents. Thus, the emphasis on competent candidates equipped with a diverse skill set is crucial to meeting organizational goals and objectives.

2.5 Youth Perception of Employability Skills

In Malaysia, the definition of youth spans from 15 to 40 years old, but the focal point of developmental initiatives lies within the 18 to 25-year-old range (Faizah, 2005). Global trends indicate a decline in employment opportunities for youth due to sluggish growth and increasing underemployment, contributing to economic and social uncertainties (International Labor Organization, 2020). The Malaysian government has responded with youth employment resolutions aimed at generating work prospects and facilitating pathways to decent employment (Faizah, 2005). The challenges faced by Malaysian youth in job-seeking include globalization, dynamic labor markets leading to job instability, and the intricate nature of work (Faizah, 2005). As depicted in Figure 3, Trait Theory and Factors emphasize that personal qualities serve as an initial step for youth to develop before embarking on a career journey.

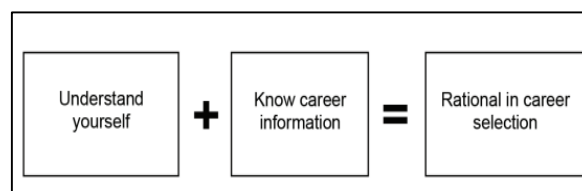


Figure 3: Career selection based on Trait Theory and Factors (Shakur *et al.*, 2020)

Modern youth need to hone both skills and personal attributes to tackle the contemporary job market, with access to career information playing a pivotal role in meeting job market expectations

(Mustapa & Abdullah, 2019). However, studies reveal that youth feel underprepared in terms of demanded employability skills such as problem-solving and communication, often lacking exposure to relevant skills (Kenayathulla *et al.*, 2019). Youth's perception of their employability skills is influenced by self-perception, industrial training, and career development activities (Dania *et al.*, 2014). Thus, encouraging early career exploration and adequate preparation for the labor market are essential (Faizah, 2005). Further research by Fitrisehara *et al.* (2009) suggests that youth believe employability skills can be gained through training and on-the-job experiences. To enhance employability, individuals should exhibit a willingness to learn and gain new skills (Ramli *et al.*, 2010), while collective efforts involving parents, educators, counselors, government entities, and youth leaders are essential in preparing youth for industry entry. Ultimately, understanding youth perceptions of employability skills is crucial for designing effective interventions to foster their competence and confidence in these skills.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach with a cross-sectional survey design to gather data from two distinct groups – youth (18 to 30 years old) and employers in Batu Pahat, Johor. The population sizes were 150,000 for youth and 14,000 for employers. Sample sizes of 384 for youth and 375 for employers were determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's guidelines. Adapted questionnaires from Fitrisehara *et al.* (2009) and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) were employed as research instruments, focusing on employability skills. Part A collected demographic information, while Part B gauged participants' perceptions of seven employability skill categories using a 5-point Likert Scale. Data were collected via Google Forms distributed through email and WhatsApp due to COVID-19, followed by phone calls and reminders, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential analysis with IBM SPSS version 20 software.

4. Results

The questionnaire was distributed randomly through online platforms like Google Forms and WhatsApp. Set 1 was given to youth respondents, while Set 2 was given to employers, resulting in a response rate of 72.5% from 306 answered youth questionnaires and 92.5% from 347 answered employer questionnaires. The demographic analysis of both groups was conducted, considering factors such as gender, age group, ethnicity, education level, and employment status. For employers, 66% were male, with the highest percentage aged 31-40 (40.6%), predominantly Malay (73.8%), holding bachelor's degrees (53.9%), followed by master's degrees (20.2%). Among youth respondents, 71.2% were female, mostly aged 21-25 (52.9%), primarily Malay (63.4%), with bachelor's degrees (46.1%), and a significant proportion being employed (53.9%). This study used descriptive analysis by referring to the mean score to indicate the level of perception towards employability skills from the employers and youth respondents. Table 3 shows the agreement level of the mean score to determine the level of perception and ranking for each variable in employability skills.

Table 3: Agreement level of mean (Yaacob *et al.*, 2019)

Interval	Level
1.00 -1.80	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	Low
2.61 – 3.40	Medium
3.41 – 4.20	High
4.21 -5.00	Very High

Table 4 presents the employer respondents' perception towards employability skills, which was analyzed using mean scores and ranked accordingly. The highest mean score of 4.66 was given to Basic

Skills, indicating its importance according to employers. The second highest mean score was 4.59, showing agreement on the importance of Personal Quality Skills. Resource and Capability Skills were ranked third, with a mean score of 4.42, followed by Thinking Skills and Interpersonal Skills, which shared the same mean score of 4.35 and were ranked fourth. Information Skills, with a mean score of 4.33, was ranked second last by the employers, whereas System and Technology Skills received the lowest mean score of 4.13. It is noteworthy that all variables showed a very high level of perception (4.21-5.00), except System and Technology Skills, which scored in the high-level range (3.41-4.20) based on Yaacob *et al.*'s (2019) classification.

Table 4: Level of perception towards employability skills from employer's respondents

No.	Employability Skills	Mean	Level	Ranking
1	Basic Skills	4.66	Very high	1
2	Thinking Skills	4.35	Very high	4
3	Personal Quality Skills	4.59	Very high	2
4	Resource Capability Skills	4.42	Very high	3
5	Interpersonal Skills	4.35	Very high	4
6	Information Skills	4.33	Very high	5
7	System Technology Skills	4.13	High	6

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that, among the six categories of employability skills, Personal Quality Skills received the highest mean score of 4.69, indicating that it was considered to be of utmost importance by the youth. Resource and Capability Skills followed closely with a mean score of 4.62, indicating that it was the second most important skill category. Information Skills obtained a mean score of 4.59, placing it in third position. Basic Skills and Interpersonal Skills both shared the same mean score of 4.55, positioning them in fourth place. Thinking Skills obtained a mean score of 4.54, which ranked it as the second last in terms of perceived importance by the youth. Finally, System and Technology Skills received the lowest mean score of 4.45. It is worth noting that all the mean scores fell within the very high level of perception range (4.21-5.00), indicating that the youth considered all the employability skills to be highly important (Yaacob *et al.*, 2019).

Table 5: Level of perception towards employability skills from youth respondents

No.	Employability Skills	Mean	Level	Ranking
1	Basic Skills	4.55	Very high	4
2	Thinking Skills	4.54	Very high	6
3	Personal Quality Skills	4.69	Very high	1
4	Resource Capability Skills	4.62	Very high	2
5	Interpersonal Skills	4.55	Very high	5
6	Information Skills	4.59	Very high	3
7	System Technology Skills	4.45	Very high	7

5. Discussion

Based on the responses of the youth participants, it appears that they place a high degree of importance on a range of employability skills that are necessary to secure employment. This result indicated that labor market opportunities are becoming polarized between high-end and low-end skilled

jobs (Joshi & Klein, 2018). Specifically, out of the seven employability skills assessed, youth respondents rated Personal Quality Skills as the most critical skill to possess, followed closely by Resource and Capability Skills, Information Skills, Basic Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Thinking Skills, and finally, System and Technology Skills. It is worth noting that Personal Quality Skills and social competencies are closely linked to human interaction and task management abilities. This is supported by Ross (2016) who explored social and emotional development in adolescence and shows that responsible decision-making is one of the component skills. This result supports the importance of Personal Quality Skills, which include responsible decision-making. Additionally, personality traits can influence motivation and cultural fit, according to research by Rodzalan and Saat (2012). Interestingly, the youth participants perceived System and Technology Skills as the least important skill, with a relatively low average mean score of 4.45, suggesting that it is the least essential employability skill from their perspective. However, the study by Picatoste *et al.* (2018) found that IT skills are important for increasing youth employability. The result suggests that System and Technology Skills may become more important in the future job market. Prihartini and Priyatna (2022) mentioned that the development of automation technology has made the workforce undergo massive changes concerning workers and jobs. These results suggest that the job market is changing, and certain skills may become important in the future. It is important for individuals to be aware of these changes and adapt their skills accordingly to increase their employability.

According to the perception of employers, employability skills are crucial for the youth to secure employment. While all the skills were deemed very highly important, System and Technology Skills have been rated the high level only. However, the rankings from the employer respondents indicated that Basic Skills were the most important, followed by Personal Quality Skills, Resource and Capability Skills, Thinking Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Information Skills, and System and Technology Skills. These findings contrast with the perception of the youth, who may not prioritize Basic Skills as highly as employers do. Basic skills are important for employers as they relate to personal development, occupational skills, and information technology skills (Sunardi *et al.*, 2016). According to Nair and Fahimirad (2019), on-site professionals from the industry demand basic skills for jobs such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management.

Overall, it is evident that possessing a strong set of employability skills is essential for young job seekers to succeed in the job market. Kazilan *et al.* (2009) found that industrial internships provide opportunities for students to develop employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management. Additionally, Schlee and Karns (2017) found that internships are an effective way to develop employability skills and gain practical experience in the field of marketing. Furthermore, Reddy (2019) suggested that engagement between employers and industry players with educational institutions must be increased to ensure that knowledge and skills regarding the current job market can be exposed to students and youth at an earlier stage. The study conducted by Suarta *et al.* (2018) confirms the importance of employability skills in the job market. The researchers found that employers now expect new workers to possess a broader range of competencies, including strong job-specific skills and employability skills, in addition to their abilities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the significant role of employability skills in shaping the job prospects of youth participants in the evolving job market. The findings indicate that youth participants perceive employability skills, particularly Personal Quality Skills, Resource and Capability Skills, and Information Skills, as crucial for securing employment. These skills are closely related to human interaction, task management, and responsible decision-making, highlighting the importance of social and emotional competencies in navigating the job market. However, it's noteworthy that System and Technology Skills were ranked as the least essential skill from the youth perspective, potentially

suggesting a shift in their perceived importance as the job landscape evolved. On the other hand, employers recognize the essential role of employability skills in hiring decisions, with Basic Skills, Personal Quality Skills, and Resource and Capability Skills topping their priority list. The divergence in rankings between youth and employers underscores the need for effective communication and alignment between the expectations of job seekers and the demands of potential employers.

In light of these findings, further research in this area can delve deeper into the reasons behind the disparities in the perceptions of youth and employers regarding the importance of certain employability skills. Investigating how educational institutions can bridge these perception gaps and enhance the development of relevant employability skills could contribute to more successful transitions from education to the workforce. Additionally, longitudinal studies could monitor the evolution of the job market and the changing significance of employability skills over time, allowing for timely adjustments in education and training programs to better equip the youth with the skills demanded by future job markets. Furthermore, research could explore the effectiveness of different interventions, such as internships or industry-academic collaborations, in fostering the growth of employability skills among young job seekers. By addressing these aspects, further research can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of employability skills and their implications for both youth and employers in an ever-changing job landscape.

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