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**MANAGERS' PERCEPTION OF GRADUATES
COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE
EMPLOYABILITY AND WORK READINESS**

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Abstract

Employability is not only about talent, techniques and experience in procuring a job but the ability to be flexible to meet the needs of the company. This means the ability of the individual to address changes and demands of the workplace. Based on such literature, this study echoes the findings on the need for academic-industry engagement to bridge the understanding of the said phenomena from the perspective of the managers in an Engineering Information Technology (IT) based company where students were selected to undergo their 8 month internship program. The study is aimed at identifying the students' communicative competence in indicating their employability and work readiness from the perspective of the managers. The study is timely as it resonates the importance of the industry-academia engagement to address the current job demand of employers and changing economic environment for graduates' sustenance in the professional workplace. The study comprised a qualitative paradigm to explore the voices of the managers who are mentors or industry supervisors of the students. The data from the interviews were thematically analyzed using NVivo software. The findings uncovered the importance of ownership, time management, pro-activeness, communicative ability and being openly expressive with ideas. Pedagogical implications are discussed to enrich the teaching and learning of students' communicative competence for Sustainable Professional Workplace Employability and Work Readiness. To be employable and work ready, graduates need to be well informed, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, competitive, communicative and abreast to meet with current employability skills, technologies and development in the industry.

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1. Introduction

Workplace employability is not only about talent, techniques and experience in procuring a job but the ability to be flexible to meet the needs of the company (Rasul, Rauf, Mansor, Yasin, & Mahamod, 2012). Workplace employability centers on the graduates agility and ability to utilize his/her achievements skills, understandings and personal attributes that appeal to employers, to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which in turn benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Omar, Manaf, Mohd, Kassim, & Aziz, 2012; Yorke, 2006). Workplace readiness, on the other hand, implies the ability and skills in “resolving conflicts, cooperation, teamwork, acceptance of others and diversity awareness, articulate verbal and written communication and language fluency social skills” (Lippman & Keith, 2009). With globalization and rapid technology development, are institutions of higher learning actually meeting the workplace needs as envisaged by employers? How do HEI’s meet employers’ expectation to ensure graduates employability and work readiness?

There has been a steady stream of research aimed at closing the gap between academic objectives and workplace needs (Gibson, 2015). Scores of employability skills studies have indicated the need for employability skills like problem solving, fluid intelligence, teamwork, digital literacy, communication skills, learner driven knowledge and skills creation (Binkley et al., 2012; Burrus, Jackson, Xi, & Steinberg, 2013). How can academic programs provide the skills employers require when these employability skills are so hard to pin down? The challenge is even more apparent when HEI’s have limited knowledge on how employers ascertain graduates employability and work readiness. There is a need to bridge the gap between academia and industry workplace needs. The issue is compounded even further when posed among English as Second and Foreign Language learners (ESL/EFL) who may lack the communicative ability, to verbalize critical thoughts, interpretations and observations (as a result of speaking anxiety) – which may inadvertently translate to poor performance, affecting human capital necessary for nation building efforts (Manalo, Watanabe & Sheppard, 2013; Radzuan & Kaur, 2010). Thus, the need to identify the employer’s perspective of graduates’ communicative competence in being employable and work ready is imperative in enhancing sustainable human capital necessary for nation-building efforts (Eleventh Malaysian Plan 11MP, 2015).

Communication is a fundamental and imperative 21st century skill which can lead to the success or failure of sustainable nation-building negotiations and efforts (Eunson, 2005; Gokool-Ramdoos & Rumjaun, 2017). In the effort to ensure continued sustenance of human capital, mastery of the English language as the language of the global world, is essential to indicate ones’ readiness to be a member of the professional community, i.e. professional engineering community (Arkoudis et al., 2009). One needs to be able to participate effectively as a member of the said community of practice in various types of oral and written communicative events, such as technical oral presentations, business meetings and sales presentations that take place in an organization (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the context of workplace communicative competence, graduates not only need to exhibit confidence in the mastery of the technical jargon but possess the ability to deliver, receive information and critique to and from an audience based on current scientific evidence (Bhattacharyya, 2014; Celce-Murcia, 2008; Dannels, Gaffney, & Martin, 2008). Graduates need to exhibit confidence in technical knowledge as well as other soft skill traits which attributes to effective workplace participation. Do the graduates exhibit the necessary communicative competence akin to that of

members of the professional community to attain gainful employment and be work ready? It is this insight will be investigated from the perspective of the employers.

This study is timely as it reiterates Gibson's (2015) study where there is no unanimity on exactly which skills employers want graduates to possess and the requisite for more proficiency in audience analysis literature, i.e. employers. The study is aimed at identifying the students' communicative competence in indicating their employability and work readiness from the perspective of the managers.

2. Problem Statement

Scores of employability studies indicate the need for graduates to possess various employability skills and competencies in order to be employed and work ready for the professional environment (Burrus et al., 2013; Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010; Hampson et al., 2009; Husain, Mokhtar, Ahmad, & Mustapha, 2010) while others indicate the challenge faced by HEI's in order to meet the ever-growing and increasing demands of employability skills requirements of graduates competency requirement and sustainability in the workplace (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth, & Rose, 2013; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Wheeler, Austin, & Glass, 2012). It is mostly the hope of all employers that employees would bring appropriate skills, knowledge, values and practical experience to the organization (Dymock & Gerber, 2002). Nonetheless, skills acquired through education do not necessarily lead to the competencies required by the job market (Helms Jørgensen, 2004). Nabi (2003) maintained that graduate employability skills vary from the traditional academic skills, e.g. critical evaluation of evidence, analysis, logical argument, problem-solving, to key skills that are acquired through higher education, e.g. communication, numeracy, and teamwork.

Graduates are required to acquire academic, technical and social skills to increase their chances of meeting the employment requirements (Zinser, 2003). Employer expectation of graduates employability skills requirements for the 21st century far differ today in view of the shift in industry expectations of graduates as a result of growing pressures on industry from intense, global competition and rapid technological advances; renewed interest in graduate leadership skills as well as large supplies of graduates competing in increasingly soft labour markets (Jackson, 2016).

Employability skills broadly considered critical in graduating students span from team working, communication, self-management and analytical skills. To Burrus, Jackson, Xi, & Steinberg (2013), the 5 competencies that stand out as important for most occupations include problem solving (e.g., complex problem solving), fluid intelligence (e.g., category flexibility), teamwork (e.g., cooperation), achievement/innovation (e.g., persistence), and communication skills (e.g., oral expression). Other studies mention the need of soft skills enhancement such as learner-driven knowledge and skills creation, collaboration, networking, and digital literacy, all attained through the process of learning and by being part of a community (Binkley et al., 2012). Employability skills have also included the need to expand to explore the inclusion of other competencies like cross-cultural fluency, systems thinking, financial literacy – that appear to be growing in importance in today's global economy (Hampson et al., 2009; O'Neil, 2014; Overtoom, 2000).

Clearly, the analysis on employability skills literature points toward the fact that various industries require different sets of employability skills for gainful employment. What is expected of a manufacturing

industry may not necessarily mirror the employer needs of a consultancy service industry. With such dynamic and varied employability skills requirement, it is undoubted that HEI's need to keep abreast with the dynamic needs of the industry in order to match graduate skills with that of the industry (Alston, Cromartie, Wakefield, & English, 2009; Robinson, 2009; Robinson, Garton, & Vaughn, 2007). In general, the ability of a person to think critically, act and reason logically, and evaluate situations to make sound decisions is a valuable asset (Robinson et al., 2007). This is where graduates also need to be work ready (Grummon, 1997; Guglielmino, Guglielmino, & Long, 1987; Taylor & Govender, 2013).

To be work ready implies that graduates need to be able to adapt and adjust their skills to that of the industry demands. Raftopoulos (2009) indicated that although employers regard the skills/competencies such as oral communication, interpersonal skills and teamwork as important, they value other work readiness skills such as self-discipline, confidence, self-reliance, leadership, mature attitude, and motivation. Employers are keen to employ graduates who possess such skills and are adaptable to changes and demands at the workplace (Ngah, Radzuan, Fauzi, & Abidin, 2011; Qomariyah, Savitri, Hadianto, & Claramita, 2016; Rasul et al., 2012). Thus, the employability skills and work readiness can include an array of basic skills, technical skills, interpersonal skills, and 21st century skills (Tanius & Susah, 2015). The basic skills of the students are determined by their ability to read, write, speak, listen and perform basic mathematical procedures. Likewise, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, communication skills, collaboration skills, creativity and innovation skills are some of the attributes of technical skills. Interpersonal skills include self-management, professional relationships, professional appearance, negotiation ability, teamwork and professional skills. A broad set of knowledge, work habit, and character traits are some of the necessary 21st century skills required for graduates' sustenance in the global workplace environment. The study indicated that most respondents claimed to possess employability skills in the form of listening, lifelong learning, self-direction, and teamwork.

It is apt to say then that HEI's, employers and the policy owners need a common understanding of the set of skills required of our graduates through shared experiences and academia-industry engagements ((Fleming, Martin, Hughes, & Zinn, 2009; Moore & Morton, 2017; Oeij, Ziauberyte-Jakstiene, & Dhondt, 2015; Suleman, 2016; Tiernan & O'Kelly, 2014; Zaharim, Yusoff, Omar, Mohamed, & Muhamad, 2009). One such shared platform where academia and industry share enhanced workplace experience is the internship program where students' are placed in specific companies to undergo a period of industrial experience and experience workplace environment via peripheral participation in the said community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Based on such literature, this study echoes the findings on the need for academic-industry engagement to bridge the understanding of the said phenomena from the perspective of the managers in an engineering IT based company where students were selected to undergo their 8-month internship program. The researchers are keen to understand what communicative competence is expected by employers to indicate students' employability and work readiness. In other words, managers through their interaction and engagement with the students' are able to gauge the employability and readiness of the students'. The study is timely as it resonates the importance of industry-academia engagement to address the current job demands of employers and changing economic environment for graduates' sustenance in the professional workplace.

3. Research Questions

As the study is aimed at identifying the students' communicative competence in indicating their employability and work readiness from the perspective of the managers, the research question posed in this study is:

- What are the managers' perception of communicative competence for graduates sustainable employability and work readiness in the professional workplace?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to understand the managers' perception of communicative competence for graduates' sustainable employability and work readiness in the professional workplace.

5. Research Methods

This study utilized an exploratory mixed method design. However, for this paper only the qualitative findings will be shared. The study comprised a qualitative paradigm in order to explore the voices of the managers who are mentors of the said students during the said students' internship in the company. In this study, third year undergraduate students in engineering and computing programs from a technical university have been identified as prospective participants as they are involved in industrial attachment programs in various companies. The students have undergone Professional Oral Communication or Language courses in the technical university.

The intended company for this Research Collaboration is an Engineering Information Technology Company that has been selected for students to undergo their Internship program. For this purpose, semi-structured interview questions were posed to the interviewees. Qualitative Data Collection (interviews) were conducted with the 6 workplace employers, who were intern supervisors for the students' projects for the duration of 8 months. Official consent was obtained from the Manager of the company who then allowed direct communication with the suggested focal employers. The 6 potential employers were selected as they were intern supervisors to the interns who were currently undergoing their industrial attachment at the company. Verbal and written consent was obtained from the said employers to be respondents in the study. The purpose and aim of the study was explained to the said employers. Interviews were conducted at the mid-entry(4th month) and exit (8th month)level of the internship program to further understand the employers' perspective of students' communication competence level for employability and work readiness. Such interview sessions were tape recorded and transcribed. The data from the interviews were thematically analyzed using NVivo software.

The qualitative data was analyzed according to Creswell's (2003) generic process of data analysis for analyzing qualitative data which includes six main steps like "organizing and preparing the data, reading through all data, coding, narrating descriptions and themes, and interpreting data" (Creswell, 2003, pp. 191-195). The said method was similarly utilised in Asmussen & Creswell qualitative gun study (1995) as cited in Creswell (2008) and in Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher & James (2001) as cited in Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie(2003, p. 355).Interviews allow researchers to understand how interviewee "view their world, to

learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences” (Patton, 2002, p. 348). Interviews enable the researcher to elicit the “voice, opinion or perspective of one’s participants” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 21). Thus, it is for this purpose that the said qualitative paradigm was explored to gain an insight of employers’ insight on the said phenomenon.

6. Findings

The managers provided various insights from the employers’ perspective to ensure employability and work readiness. The themes derived from the findings include the importance of ensuring and inculcating professionalism, competitiveness, self-accountability and ownership, time management, sense of alertness and self-reliance, accountable, self-motivated, self-driven and compassionate when assigned to tasks.

6.1. Cultivating Lifetime Professionalism

For Manager A, employability and work readiness is depicted when there is Professionalism by equipping staff with the right competencies who will then be able to practice professionally within and outside the company. The aspect of training is structured in the internship program where competencies are identified and training meted out to ensure sustenance of manpower competency necessary for effective workplace participation. This was indicated when Manager A mentioned,

“... We need to cultivate and ensure that calculate the staff has very high competence so that can serve the industry well...And the goal is that when they get out of this company, the competencies learned will carry more weight and they can survive outside...”

Thus, it is the prerogative of the Human Resource department to identify and provide necessary training to provide the necessary competency for the staff. Much of the practices of the company are also in line with the government’s nation building initiative of developing human capital (Blueprint, 2012; Gibson, 2015). This indicates the willingness of the company to invest in training to ensure that the staffs are equipped with up-to-date training and skills competencies to meet workplace and global challenges expected in such competitive dynamic work environment. Thus, the need for cultivating a sense of professionalism is an essential trait of ensuring employability and work readiness.

6.2. Value Added Skills Necessary to be a Competitive Global Player

From the perspective of an employer, trainings are provided to staff in order for staff to be a global competitive player, and be ahead of competitors. With a borderless world in the IT industry, staff must be value added with necessary technical and non-technical expertise (Rasul et al., 2012). Manager B mentioned,

“...We have now, you know ‘ada (have)’ competitors, so we need to make sure that our talent is valued and the investors are willing to come because we have competent talents...”

The employer shares the knowledge where neighboring competitors in China provide training in English language programs as part of the company's need to be communicatively competent. For the said company, the seriousness of being a global market player is indicated when a walk around the company premise indicated the presence of a "corporate academic university" and training rooms available at one of the levels of the company. Staffs are provided with daily training sessions in various skills competency programs. For interns, a structured "graduate attachment program" is mandatory for interns to gain competency in both the "field experience" and trouble shoot desktop "performance management assessments". The overall exposure allows interns to be exposed to more formal and informal learning practices in and outside the departments of the company. This implies that there is a need to keep abreast with necessary innovative competency skill requirement needs to ensure that our graduates are employable and work ready (Jackson, 2016; Taylor & Govender, 2013).

6.3. Ecosystem for Talent Sourcing and Mobility

The sustenance of employability and work readiness is not only instrumental among the manpower but that of the organizational set up. Employers are vigilant of the staff's talents and address such competencies via mutual discussion. This means there is a need for both employers and graduates to have a mutual and open discussion on matching the capabilities with rightful job specifications. Manager C mentions,

"...Talents are noted and mutual discussions are held to ensure that the competencies of the staff are rightfully matched to the area of interest. This ensures the right ecosystem is set to ensure sustainable human capital for employability and talent sourcing. With the corporate university, the in-house company provides the certification courses to the staff..."

This clearly mirrors the company's commitment to equipping its staff with the required competencies so that staffs enjoy higher remuneration in relation to the skill competency. To be employable, both employers and graduates or staffs need to match skills with specific interest areas to be able to create staff mobility within departments and outside of the company (Ngah et al., 2011; Qomariyah et al., 2016; Rasul et al., 2012).

6.4. Personality Trait: Self-Motivation and Self-Driven

Another aspect of importance where employers gauge the interns' employability and work readiness is when staff (inclusive of interns and fulltime staff) take ownership of the task delivered. This is reflected in Manager D's response who stated the criteria of work commitment and ownership of the individual to the said task. This is clearly indicated if the individual invested in the task productively or otherwise. Manager D mentions the importance of employability and work readiness is judged by the individual's

"...work knowledge, ability, work habit, performance, you can see on the knowledge ability, job knowledge, whether its minimum, or over work productivity, the work quality,...whether they are really productive or not productive..."

Thus, the employability and work readiness of an individual is gauged by his or her well preparedness of the individual in taking ownership of acquiring more knowledge and performing productively on the task (Billett, 2001; West, 2017).

6.5. Accountability and Time-Management Skills

For Manager E, part of employability and work readiness ethic requirement is the importance for individuals

“to note the urgency and the importance to deliver within the timeline...if a task is delivered to the individuals on a certain time, we expect the students or staff to complete it urgently as clients demand solutions for their problems. This is critical for students to understand...”

To Manager E, graduates sometimes fail to see the urgency of attending to an assignment at the initial stage of the internship program. However, over time, a difference is noted when graduates are provided with “real problem-solving issues” faced by the clients. Thus, the importance of time management is fundamental for individuals to adhere to as much of the company’s feedback to a client is based on the teamwork and commitment by all by a specific deadline. The essence of time management is concurred in other employability studies (McGarry, 2016; Moore & Morton, 2017). From the pedagogical implication, there is a need to ensure adherence to timeline and accountability is instilled in individual and team assignments. It is also important for graduates to realize the need to communicate effectively as a team and not as individuals within a team (Binkley et al., 2012; Burrus et al., 2013).

6.6. Goal Driven and Result Oriented

To be employable and work ready, an individual must be pro-active, talented and passionate about what he or she does. For Manager F,

“...the passion ‘tu’ is what drive you to use that talent to get a result. So for a company, we are a business entity, and result and also profit matters to us. So it has to be-you, for example, you may not have the passion ‘untukmasak (to cook)’, but it can still be part of your passion but not as your core business ‘punyabenda (must have)’. So your passion is to get things done using your skill related to the software for sure...”

This finding concurs with employability studies which states the importance of passion and motivation of students to attain gainful employment and ensure career success (Hurst, Fowler, & Scapens, 2017; Raftopoulos, 2009). The pedagogical implication is to develop business driven orientation projects for graduates to instill the importance of speed and result driven analysis in order to prepare graduates to be more employable and work ready.

7. Conclusion

To be employable and work ready as envisaged by the employers, individuals need to be equipped with essential technical and non-technical skills that indicate the competence and competitive edge of graduates globally. Graduates need to step up and be ahead by communicating the sense of accountability as a professional and not expect to be told. In other words, graduates need to actively participate by being a visible member of the professional community of practice and that of the company. In other words, the graduate is actually a “mini ambassador” of the company and not merely an intern from an academic institution. He is seen as a full pledged member and staff of the company even if placed as an intern during the said training program. At the same time, both academia and industries should not be complacent with current knowledge necessary to complete workplace tasks and targets but be constantly equipped and abreast to gain a winning edge over competitors. In order to attain employability and be work ready, students, academia and industry need to be abreast with current employability skills, technologies and development in the industry so as to be a global and sustainable player in the professional workplace environment.

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