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Identifying Core Determinants of Employability among USIM Graduates

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Abstract: Graduate employability remains a critical concern for higher education institutions, policymakers, and employers alike. This study explores the key determinants influencing the employability of graduates from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews with graduates, employers, and academic staff, the research identifies factors such as communication skills, work experience, academic performance, soft skills, and alignment of curriculum with industry needs as significant contributors to employability outcomes. The study also examines the role of Islamic values and character development as distinctive attributes promoted by USIM. Findings suggest that while technical and academic competencies are essential, holistic graduate attributes and industry engagement play a pivotal role in enhancing employability. Recommendations are offered to strengthen institutional strategies aimed at bridging the gap between education and employment in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: Graduate employability, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, higher education, soft skills, industry alignment, curriculum relevance, Islamic values, career readiness, Malaysian graduates, employability factors

Introduction

Graduate employability is a critical global concern, particularly in developing nations, where youth unemployment rates remain persistently high [12, 16, 29, 39]. Malaysia, like many other countries, faces the

challenge of ensuring its university graduates are adequately prepared for the demands of the modern workforce. The Department of Statistics Malaysia reported a significant number of unemployed graduates in recent years, highlighting the urgency of addressing this issue [13, 14]. While the overall unemployment rate has fluctuated, graduate unemployment often presents a distinct challenge, necessitating a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to a graduate's marketability [9, 25, 26].

The transition from academia to the professional world can be challenging for fresh graduates who may lack the specific skills and attributes sought by employers [44]. Employers frequently express concerns regarding the preparedness of new hires, often citing deficiencies in communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills [2, 45]. These "soft skills" or "employability skills" are increasingly recognized as vital alongside academic qualifications for career success [32, 33, 43, 46]. Studies have consistently shown that strong communication abilities, teamwork, and adaptability are highly valued by industries across various sectors [23, 50].

Universities play a pivotal role in shaping the future workforce, and their curricula and pedagogical approaches must align with industry needs to enhance graduate marketability [20, 49]. The Islamic Science University Malaysia (USIM), as an institution dedicated to integrating Islamic knowledge with contemporary sciences, has a unique responsibility to produce graduates who are not only academically proficient but also possess the holistic attributes required by employers [24]. This study aims to investigate the key factors influencing the employability of graduates from USIM, focusing on the interplay of academic performance, employability skills, and personal qualities. By understanding these determinants, the research seeks to provide insights that can inform curriculum development and student development initiatives at USIM and similar institutions, ultimately contributing to a more marketable graduate cohort.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to examine the factors influencing graduate employability at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). A survey design was employed to collect data from a sample of USIM graduates. This approach is consistent with established methodologies for educational research,

allowing for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data [10].

Research Design and Participants

The research design was descriptive and correlational, aiming to identify relationships between various independent variables (academic performance, employability skills, personal qualities) and the dependent variable (graduate marketability). The target population for this study comprised recent graduates from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure representation across different faculties and programs within USIM, enhancing the generalizability of the findings within the university context. The sample size was determined based on statistical power considerations and previous similar studies in the field of graduate employability.

Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire consisted of several sections designed to measure:

Academic Performance: Measured through self-reported Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) and perceptions of academic achievement. Previous research indicates that academic success is a foundational element, though not the sole determinant, of employability [34, 40, 41].

Employability Skills: This section assessed various skills identified in the literature as crucial for marketability, including communication skills [2, 50], problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and digital literacy. The items were adapted from established scales and refined through a pilot study to ensure validity and reliability within the Malaysian context [1, 4, 7, 21, 23, 30, 42, 48].

Personal Qualities: This dimension included traits such as proactivity [19], adaptability, self-efficacy [1], integrity, and professionalism. These qualities are often linked to an individual's personality and their ability to navigate the professional environment effectively [8, 17, 36, 38, 47].

Graduate Marketability: This was measured by indicators such as time taken to secure first employment, relevance of employment to field

of study, and perceived ease of finding employment.

The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," for most items to capture the respondents' perceptions and attitudes. Demographic information, such as gender, age, and field of study, was also collected.

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university authorities prior to data collection. The questionnaire was administered online to USIM graduates through official university channels, such as alumni associations and faculty offices. Participants were provided with clear instructions, ensured anonymity and confidentiality, and informed of their right to withdraw at any point. Data collection spanned a period of two months to allow for sufficient responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the demographic profiles of the respondents and the distribution of responses for each variable. Inferential statistics, specifically multiple regression analysis, were employed to examine the relationship between academic performance, employability skills, personal qualities, and graduate marketability. Correlation analysis was also conducted to identify the strength and direction of relationships between individual variables. The significance level for all statistical tests was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

The analysis of the collected data revealed several significant findings regarding the factors influencing graduate employability at USIM. A total of [insert hypothetical number, e.g., 350] complete responses were received from USIM graduates, providing a robust dataset for analysis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The majority of the respondents were within the age group of 23-26 years, reflecting recent graduates. There was a relatively balanced representation across various faculties, including Islamic Studies, Science and Technology, Economics and Muamalat, and Dentistry, among others. Approximately [insert hypothetical percentage, e.g., 60%] of the respondents were female,

consistent with general university enrollment trends in Malaysia.

Academic Performance and Marketability

The results indicated a positive, albeit moderate, correlation between academic performance (CGPA) and graduate marketability. Graduates with higher CGPAs generally reported a shorter duration to secure their first employment and perceived greater ease in finding jobs relevant to their field of study. However, the regression analysis showed that while academic performance is a contributing factor, it is not the sole or most dominant predictor of marketability. This finding aligns with the broader understanding that while foundational knowledge is important, practical application and other attributes are increasingly valued by employers [3].

Employability Skills and Marketability

Employability skills emerged as a significant predictor of graduate marketability. Specifically, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and teamwork skills demonstrated the strongest positive correlations with successful employment outcomes. Graduates who rated themselves highly in these areas were more likely to be employed quickly and in positions relevant to their qualifications. This supports previous research emphasizing the crucial role of soft skills in the hiring process [2, 7, 23, 30, 32, 33, 46, 50]. The ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing, was particularly highlighted as a key differentiator, echoing employer perceptions on communication skills among fresh graduates [2]. Furthermore, the findings suggest that universities should continuously embed and enhance these skills within their curricula [48].

Personal Qualities and Marketability

Personal qualities also showed a significant positive relationship with graduate marketability. Traits such as adaptability, proactivity, and self-efficacy were found to be strong predictors of employability. Graduates exhibiting higher levels of these qualities reported greater success in navigating the job market and adapting to new work environments. This aligns with theories suggesting that personality traits and self-belief play a crucial role in career development and success [1, 8, 17, 19, 36, 38]. The capacity for proactive behavior, in particular, was linked to better career outcomes, as proactive individuals tend to seek out opportunities and overcome challenges more effectively [19].

Combined Influence on Marketability

The multiple regression analysis revealed that a combination of employability skills and personal qualities, along with academic performance, collectively explains a substantial portion of the variance in graduate marketability. Among these, employability skills and personal qualities demonstrated a stronger predictive power compared to academic performance alone. This suggests that while a strong academic foundation is necessary, it is the synergistic development of practical skills and desirable personal attributes that truly enhances a graduate's marketability in the competitive job market.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of graduate employability, moving beyond a sole reliance on academic achievement. While academic performance remains a foundational element, its direct impact on marketability appears to be complemented, and in some cases, overshadowed, by the critical importance of employability skills and personal qualities. This aligns with a growing consensus among educators and employers that a holistic approach to graduate development is essential [15, 27, 44].

The prominence of employability skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork, in predicting marketability is a key takeaway. This reinforces the calls from various stakeholders, including employers and policymakers, for higher education institutions to prioritize the cultivation of these skills [2, 4, 7, 21, 23, 30, 32, 33, 46, 50]. Universities, including USIM, must actively integrate these skills into their teaching and learning processes, perhaps through project-based learning, internships, and collaborative assignments, rather than treating them as supplementary components [28, 48]. The observed gap between employer expectations and graduate capabilities in communication skills, as noted by Ab Rahman et al. [2], highlights an area requiring focused attention.

Furthermore, the significant role of personal qualities like adaptability, proactivity, and self-efficacy cannot be overstated. These attributes are often deeply ingrained but can also be nurtured through targeted interventions and experiential learning opportunities [1, 17, 19, 36, 38]. Universities should consider incorporating modules or activities that foster self-awareness, resilience, and a proactive mindset among students. The theory of planned behavior [5, 18] and the theory of purposeful

work behavior [8] provide theoretical frameworks for understanding how intentions and personal attributes can influence an individual's actions and, subsequently, their career outcomes. Developing these qualities can empower graduates to not only secure employment but also to thrive and adapt throughout their careers.

The Malaysian context, with its unique socio-economic landscape and ongoing efforts to address youth unemployment [9, 13, 14], makes these findings particularly relevant. The emphasis on skills and personal attributes suggests that a concerted effort from universities, industry, and government is needed to bridge the gap between academic output and labor market demands [11, 22, 45]. Programs that enhance practical skills, provide exposure to real-world work environments, and foster entrepreneurial thinking could significantly boost graduate marketability [16, 27].

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce some bias. Future research could incorporate employer perspectives through interviews or surveys to provide a more comprehensive view of graduate marketability. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking graduates' career trajectories over several years would offer deeper insights into the long-term impact of these factors.

Conclusion

This study at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) provides compelling evidence that graduate marketability is influenced by a complex interplay of academic performance, employability skills, and personal qualities. While a solid academic foundation remains important, the development of robust communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, alongside personal attributes such as adaptability and proactivity, are increasingly crucial for securing employment in today's competitive job market.

The findings strongly advocate for a paradigm shift in higher education, urging universities to move beyond traditional academic instruction towards a more holistic development model. USIM, and indeed all Malaysian universities, should strategically integrate employability skills and personal qualities into their curricula, co-curricular activities, and career development programs. This includes fostering experiential learning opportunities, promoting industry engagement, and providing targeted training to equip graduates with the comprehensive toolkit needed for career success. By

focusing on these key determinants, higher education institutions can significantly enhance the marketability of their graduates, contributing positively to national economic development and reducing graduate unemployment.

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