EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL STUDENTS WITH HEARING IMPAIREMENTS: EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the employers' requirement for employability skills of the technical and vocational students who are hearing impaired. The research instrument used was adapted from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) which consists of thirty nine items. The employability skills surveyed include basic skills, thinking skills, personal qualities, sourcing skills, information skills, interpersonal skills, system skills and technology skills. The instrument was distributed to 110 industry employers throughout Malaysia. However, only 23 (21%) employers returned the survey form. The majority of respondents are from service industry (78.2%) including the retail, food service, restaurants and hotel as well as the fashion designing industry. A high percentage of the respondents (65.2%) are Human Resource Manager who had one to five years of working experience. Based on the survey, the three top most highly rated skills are, personal qualities (M=4.37, SD=.39), basic skills (M=4.10, SD=.58) and interpersonal skills (M=4.07, SD=.47). Knowing the skills that employers demand from their hearing impaired employees, institutions can provide the appropriate training to prepare their hearing impaired graduates for future employment.

Keywords: *employability skills, SCANS, technical and vocational students with hearing impaired*

1 INTRODUCTION

The Knowledge-economy its globalization has created a greater human capital needs knowledge-workers (k-workers) at the professional and semi-professional level. Employers prefer to employ knowledge workers (K-workers) as it helps to move their industry in line with the economic growth of a country including Malaysia. The economic growth in Malaysia with a shift in industry focus from manufacturing to the service sector has increased job demand for skilled workers who have high soft skills and good self-competencies in addition to the necessary technical skills as reported in the Executive Report of the Research on Polytechnics Graduate 2007 conducted by the Jabatan Pengurusan Politeknik dan Kolej Komuniti (JPPKK, 2008). Furthermore, this report highlights the variations in the skills demanded by employers' that seem to vary from state to state depending on the focus of the industry.

In general, employers are more likely to hire workers who have a good set employability skill such as self-management skills, working in groups, interpersonal skills, problem solving, and critical thinking, in order to improve their company's productivity (Overtoom, 2000; Khor, 2002; Abdul Aziz, 2005; Reichardt, 2008). Johannes, Beatrice and Tonette (2008) express the importance of employability skills for workers and this statement is agreed by the employers. This situation reflects that the increased in labour demand not only required those who have academic qualifications and technical skills but also must have the employability skills (Ahmad Muhaimin, Jamalludin and Baharudin, 2008). Therefore, employers expect the learning institutions to produce graduates who have the necessary skills without requiring further training from the industry.

In the context of people with special needs, the economic change has created greater challenge for them to prepare themselves for the working environment. The need to establish their credibility has become more crucial as many employers tend to question their ability and performance in the workplace. According to Drummond and Ryn (1995) in Rohany (2003), employers perceive that workers with special needs are less productive as they often fall sick and require incur much medical expenses. Employers are also sceptical of capabilities and competencies which they perceive to be very limited. Moreover, due to lack of knowledge and understanding of this particular group of special needs, it may cause employers and public to have a bad perception. As highlighted in Chubon (1992), society should identify negative attitude of special needs group, in order to help them to find solution to change the negative attitude indirectly. Furthermore, better understanding would lead to clearer and reasonable expectations which can only lead to better working relationships and productivity. Although, one percent quota of government jobs are reserved to the special needs group, the reluctance of employers to participate in the program is still a cause for concern.

2 EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2008) defined employability skills as a set of skills that allow individuals to get, to keep and to succeed in employment; including group work skills and work habits, interpersonal skills, learning, thinking and adaptability skills. These skills are the aspects of job competencies that should be known and owned by all employees to enable them to become a skilled worker who are capable of exploring the world of work (Yahya and Muhammad Rashid, 2001). The Conference Board of Canada (CBC) (2002), refers employability skills as comprising three key skills groups; a) Basic Skills; referring to the skills needed as a basis for future development, b) Personal Management Skills; referring to personal skills, behaviours and actions that drive a person to develop their potential, c) Team Skills; referring to skills and attributes that are needed to contribute productively to a company.

Johannes et al. (2008) looked at employability skills from three perspectives based on observation of the past decades, namely society, employers and employees. According to Johannes et al. (2008), from society perspectives, an employability skill is an opportunity indicator for people to get jobs. For employers, employability is an indicator of the opportunity to balance the supply and demand throughout the changing of the organization. While from the perspective of the individual or employee, employability skills is an indicator of the opportunity for him to get a good job in the world of jobs. Although employability skills cannot create any jobs, but skills can help individuals to adapt to changes and to cope with environmental demands (Ivan, 2007). Thus, the ability to get a job is not only determined by the level of academic and technical skills one has but also on the skills to market these assets to the prospective employers.

2.1 Employability skills required by employers

A study about what employers think and want regarding to graduate employability by Archer and Divison (2008) has found that 86% of employers consider good communication skills to be important, soft skills such as team working are also vital and even more important than most hard skills, although numeracy and literacy skills are considered essential by 70% of employers. Hawthorne (2007) agreed with the study conducted by the Job Outlook (2007), which is according to the employer, a combination of skills, education, experiences and a good attitude and the ability to increase productivity in the long run, could increase the potential of an individual with special needs to be employed. Employers also prefer to hire new graduates who have gained relevant working experience. Quek (2005) found that interpersonal skills, skills to acquire knowledge and flexibility have a significant relationship with a successful career, while Ab. Rahim and Ivan (2007) found that the employers in their study tend to choose graduates who are skilled in information technology, innovative and creative.

The importance attached to a type of employability skills may vary depending on employers. Research by Mohamed Sattar, Md Yusof and Napisah (2009) showed that the larger companies that have more than 200 employees emphasize more on employability skills compared to small-sized companies that have less than 200 employees. Regardless of company size, three elements

are found by employers to be important namely, thinking skills, interpersonal skills and personal qualities. Figure 1 shows the range of employability skills and their importance according to Mohammad Sattar *et al*. (2009).

MOST IMPORTANT	**VERY IMPORTANT**	**IMPORTANT**	**MODERATELY IMPORTANT**
Interpersonal skills	Serve customer, ability to negotiate, ability to lead, teach others, Working with people from diverse background	Able to participate as members	
Thinking skills	Problem solving, think creative/innovative, know how to learn, able to visualize	See things with minds, decision making	
Personal Qualities	Safety, integrity & honest, responsibility	Self-management, self-belief, ability to work without supervision, Sociable	Adaptability
Resource skills	Material and facilities management, risk management	Financial management, time management, human resource management	
System and technology skills		Choosing technology, understanding the system, using technologies while working, fixing tools, observation and improving the implementation	
Basic skills		Listening, reading, writing, speaking, mathematic and arithmetic	
Information management skills	Achieve and evaluate information	Using computer to process information	Interpret and distribute information, and preserve the information
MODERATELY IMPORTANT			

Source: Mohamad Sattar et al. (2009)

Figure 1. Level of importance of employability skills

In summary, irrespective of ranking, employability skills are set of achievements that include skills, understanding and individual qualities that enable graduates to gain employment and succeed in the career choices that can benefit themselves, the job market, community and also the economy (Lees, 2000). Hence, by having a good employability skills have made it easier for the students being absorbed into the job market, more flexible in facing the challenges of globalization and also a challenging future (Siti Rahayah, Jamil & Nur 'Ashiqin, 2010).

3 METHODOLOGY

This research is a quantitative exploratory study. Respondents of this study are the employers who have cooperated with the institutions in providing space for industrial training to the technical and vocational students with hearing impairments. Meanwhile, the location of these employers are scattered throughout Malaysia. To assess the demand for employability from the employers' perspective, the instrument used was adapted from Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The instrument consists of eight constructs namely (1) Basic skills, (2) Thinking skills, (3) Personal qualities, (4) Resource skills, (5) Information skills, (6) Interpersonal skills, (7) System skills and (8) Technology skills. Each item in the questionnaire is answered using a five-point Likert. A high value given to a statement indicates a high importance of the employability skills to the employer, while a low value indicates the opposite.

Instruments are sent to employers by ordinary mail and emails. The researcher first sends a covering letter or email to the employer to inform them that they are selected as respondents to this study before sending the instrument to them. For the instruments sent by ordinary mail, self-addressed envelope with stamp was attached to expedite return of questionnaires. This method was believed to increase the response rate of the questionnaire respondents according to Bernard (2000) and Jackson (2002).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive data analysis techniques were used with output in terms of frequencies, means, percentages and ranks.

4.1 Demographics

Twenty three (21%) out of 110 employers who received the questionnaires returned completed forms to the researcher. The low response rate was unavoidable and was not thought as a cause for concern since it is quite common in social science research that calls for volunteer participations as highlighted by Bartlett, Kortlik and Higgins (2001). In our study, the majority of respondents are from the service industry companies (78.2%) followed by the manufacturing (8.7%) and the development industry (4.3%) (Table 1). Most of the respondents are the Human Resource Manager (65.2%). There are also supervisors (17.4%) and respondents with other positions (17.4%) who have responded to the instrument. Sixteen respondents (69.6%) have had

between one to five years of working experiences, 21.7% have between 6 to 10 years and the rest have between 11 to 15 years of working experiences.

Table 1. Profiles of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency (%)
Type of industry	
Manufacturing	2 (8.7)
Development	1 (4.3)
Services	18 (78.2)
Others	2 (8.7)
Position of respondents	
Human Resource Manager	15 (65.2)
Supervisor	4 (17.4)
Others	4 (17.4)
Working experiences (yr)	
1 – 5	16 (69.6)
6 – 10	5 (21.7)
11 – 15	2 (8.7)

4.2 Ratings on employability skills

The means of employability skills elements are ranked in order of highest to lowest mean value and arranged accordingly in Table 2. The high position indicates a higher importance placed by employers on these elements. Personal qualities (M=4.37, SD= .39) obtained the highest mean value, followed by basic skills (M=4.10, SD=.58) and interpersonal skills (M=4.07, SD=.47), which showed that the three elements are very important according to the employers.

Lower ranking elements that are considered as essential by employers are resource skill (M=3.93, SD=.48), thinking skills (M=3.79, SD=.51), information management skills (M=3.63, SD=.69), system skills (M=3.53, SD=.60) and technology skills (M=3.24, SD= .69). Their rankings are similar to that found by Mohamad Sattar et al. (2009) with a major difference where basic skills fall low in their study and found to be of high importance in the current study.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on the employability skills required from employers' perspective

Item	Employability Skills Component	*M*	*SD*
	Personal Qualities	**4.37**	**.387**
B12	Responsibility	4.57	.507
B13	Self confidence	4.43	.590
B14	Social ability	4.35	.487
B15	Self-management	4.09	.596
B16	Integrity	4.70	.470
B17	Self-discipline	4.61	.583
B18	Adaptability	4.30	.559
B19	Ability to work without supervision	4.00	.603
B20	Security work	4.26	.752
	Basic skills	**4.10**	**.577**
B1	Reading	4.13	.815
B2	Writing	3.96	.878
B3	Counting	3.78	.850
B4	Listening	4.26	.689
B5	Communication	4.35	.647
	Interpersonal Skills	**4.07**	**.471**
B17	Self-discipline	4.61	.583
B18	Adaptability	4.30	.559
B19	Ability to work without supervision	4.00	.603
B20	Security work	4.26	.752
B29	Team working	4.39	.722
B30	Teach others	4.00	.953
B31	Ability to serve	4.09	.668
B32	Ability to lead	4.04	.562
B33	Ability to negotiate	3.83	.576
B34	Working with people from diverse background	4.13	.757

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on the employability skills required from employers' perspective (Cont.)

Item	Employability Skills Components	*M*	*SD*
	Resource Skills	**3.93**	**.479**
B21	Time management	4.30	.559
B22	Financial management	3.57	.788
B23	Material and facilities management	3.83	.717
B24	Risk management	4.04	.638
	Thinking Skills	**3.79**	**.507**
B6	Creative and innovative	3.74	.915
B7	Making decision	3.70	.765
B8	Problem solving	3.91	.793
B9	To visualize	3.70	.765
B10	Know how to learn	3.96	.638
B11	Reasoning	3.78	.736
	Information Skills	**3.63**	**.694**
B25	Acquiring and management of information	3.83	.778
B26	Compiling and maintaining information	3.61	.839
B27	Interpret and disseminate information	3.61	.839
B28	Using computer to process information	3.48	1.039
	System Skills	**3.53**	**.601**
B35	Understand the technology system	3.74	.864
B36	Monitor and improve system implementation	3.52	.665
B37	Selecting Technology	3.35	.775
	Technology Skills	**3.24**	**.689**
B38	Applying technology	3.43	.896
B39	Repairing technology	3.04	.928

The finding is slightly different from that of Mohamad Sattar et al. (2009). While Mohamad Sattar et al. (2009) found interpersonal skills as the most important employability skills, the current study found that personal qualities is the most important skills employers want from their hearing impaired employees and interpersonal skills is the third most important skills hearing impaired job-seekers should have. In their study, Mohamad Sattar et al. (2009) found that personal qualities are less demanded, lagging behind after interpersonal and thinking skills. Most significant finding from the current study is the ranking of basic skills; basic skills which is

found to be the second lowest important skills in Mohamad Sattar et al. (2009) has been identified to be the second most important for hearing impaired graduate seeking employment as rated by employers with hearing impaired workers.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to determine the employability skills most required by employers of hearing impaired graduates from Malaysian polytechnics. The study found that there are similarities between the skills sought from ordinary workers and hearing impaired workers. While basic skills elements may be lowly ranked for ordinary workers it is the second most important skills a hearing impaired employee should have following personal qualities.

The finding from this study has implications on training of hearing impaired students. Training differentiations between mainstream and hearing impaired students is desired in some areas so that enhanced graduate employability skills that are appropriate for their special group can be achieved such that they can have the necessary competitive edge in seeking employment. Simply adopting the training needs of mainstream students in terms of employability skills may not be adequate in preparing hearing impaired students for work.

Collaboration between educational institutions, employers and professionals from industry can be established to enhance the relevance of the curriculum and also the teaching and learning process, so that the employability skills of hearing impaired students are meeting the needs of employers. The government through the Ministry of Higher Education should also increase the public awareness towards the special needs group through campaigns and media so that they can easily get information about this group. If the technical and vocational students with hearing impaired are equipped with the necessary technical and employability skills, at least their opportunity for employment is wider.

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