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Perception of Employers Regarding the Employability Skills Required by Graduates

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Abstract

The rapid development of technology and globalization, particularly with the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0), has transformed the global labor market. Graduates now not only need to possess high academic qualifications but also employability skills such as communication, problem-solving, and the ability to adapt to technological changes. In Malaysia, graduate employability has become a major issue, with a lack of relevant skills among graduates. This study aims to assess employers' perceptions of the employability skills required by graduates in the Mechanical and Construction sectors. The research design used is a survey method with a quantitative approach, utilizing questionnaires involving 70 respondents from both sectors around Batu Pahat, Johor. Six main elemenons assessed are leadership skills, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, information and communication technology (ICT), and English proficiency. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent T-test to determine the differences between the two sectors. The findings of the study show that leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills received the highest mean scores in both sectors, with employability levels rated as moderately high. Independent T-test analysis indicates no significant differences in employers' perceptions between the Mechanical and Construction sectors regarding these elements. Although there are slight variations in mean scores between the sectors, the results reflect that the employability skill requirements are almost similar in both industries. This study suggests that higher education institutions should adapt their curriculum and skills training to ensure that graduates are better prepared with relevant skills. Additional emphasis should be placed on communication, leadership, ICT, and English proficiency, especially in the era of rapid digitalization and globalization. Overall, this study provides guidance to graduates, employers, and educational institutions in enhancing graduate employability and meeting the dynamic needs of the Mechanical and Construction industries.

1. Introduction

In today's job market, securing employment opportunities requires more than excellence in education. Practical skills and personal attributes gained through workplace training are essential for graduates to be employable (Ornellas, 2018; Reddy, 2019). Employers seek graduates with these employability skills because they contribute to better job performance, benefiting not only the individual but also the workforce, community, and economy (Reddy, 2019; Rohanai et al., 2020). In fact, without employability skills, there is a decline in competitiveness and economic returns (Rohanai et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important for graduates to develop these skills to improve their job security and contribute to societal growth and development.

The high unemployment rate among graduates can have negative effects on the economy. According to the Labor Market Information and Analysis Institute (ILMIA) (2017), unemployed youth are unable to contribute significantly to the country's economic development, especially during critical economic recovery stages. In Malaysia, current statistics show that unemployment is caused by several factors, such as lack of work experience, skills, education level, and mismatched skills with job market requirements. Employers prioritize communication skills during recruitment, followed by work experience, interpersonal skills, enthusiasm, and commitment. This information was provided by the Ministry of Finance in 2019 (Shakur et al., 2020).

Graduate unemployment is a critical ongoing issue in many countries, such as Nigeria (Olojuolawe et al., 2022), South Africa (Habiyaremye et al., 2022), Lebanon (Dibeh et al., 2019), Brunei (Musa & Idris, 2023), and Malaysia (Toh, 2017). One of the main reasons for this issue is the mismatch between the skills possessed by graduates and the skills required by employers (Rohanai et al., 2020; Olojuolawe et al., 2022; Habiyaremye et al., 2022). This mismatch has led to decreased competitiveness and reduced economic returns (Rohanai et al., 2020). A lack of awareness about the importance of employability skills is also a major contributing factor to graduate unemployment (Ifeoma, 2018). Soft skills such as leadership, communication, and networking are becoming increasingly important in enhancing employability as jobs become more limited (Habiyaremye et al., 2022). Therefore, education managers in higher education institutions need to revise curricula to reflect the skills required by employers (Olojuolawe et al., 2022).

The issue of unemployment is frequently discussed in Malaysia and globally. This is due to graduates not paying enough attention or showing interest in improving their employability skills (Halim & Sahid, 2020). One factor is the lack of awareness regarding employability skills. Often, graduates do not understand what employers want and how important employability skills are. They may not be exposed to sufficient information about the skills needed for their careers (Halim & Sahid, 2020). They may not realize that these skills need to be developed. This results in their lack of preparation for entering the job market to search for the jobs they desire. Graduates may fail to meet the requirements of employers if they do not try to improve their employability skills. This can lead to difficulties in securing jobs and contribute to a higher number of unemployed graduates.

2. Objectives

Based on the issues discussed above, three objectives are established for the study to be conducted:

a) To identify employers' perceptions regarding the employability skill elements required by graduates in the mechanical field.
b) To identify employers' perceptions regarding the employability skill elements required by graduates in the construction field.
c) To identify the differences in employers' perceptions regarding the employability skill elements required by graduates in the mechanical and construction fields.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study is the survey method, aimed at systematically collecting data to obtain a comprehensive overview of employers' perceptions regarding the importance of employability skills in the mechanical and construction industries.

3.1 Population and Study Sample

The target group for this study is the mechanical and construction industries around Batu Pahat, Johor. The target respondents are employers or executives actively involved in the recruitment process, including Human Resources, Supervisors, and Managers from large and medium-sized companies in Batu Pahat, Johor.

In this study, snowball sampling techniques were used to obtain relevant data from the target population. This sampling technique is appropriate when the target population is difficult to identify directly or when detailed information about the members of the population is unavailable (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). The snowball technique involves identifying initial respondents who then suggest other individuals to participate in the study, forming an expanding network of respondents (Goodman, 1961).

Using this approach, the snowball sample size grows as each additional subject recruits more subjects (Rahman et al., 2023). The researcher conducted a study on employers holding positions such as managers, supervisors, and human resources in the mechanical and construction fields. However, it was challenging to find suitable respondents through traditional sampling methods. Once a few initial individuals were identified to participate in the study, they could assist in recruiting other respondents they know in the same industry. This process can be done through professional networks, industry associations, or internal company referrals.

According to Chan (2020), the snowball sampling technique is highly beneficial in social research as it allows researchers to access populations that are difficult to reach, such as minority groups or specific communities. In the context of this study, the target population is workers from the mechanical and construction industries in Batu Pahat, Johor, which are difficult to detect using traditional sampling methods. A total of 70 respondents were identified through the snowball technique, starting with 15 initial respondents obtained from the local company database.

3.2 Research Instrument

This study uses a questionnaire as the main instrument to achieve the research objectives. The researcher has adapted and modified the questionnaire instrument from previous studies. The questionnaire consists of seven sections, namely Section A to Section G. Section A contains items that collect respondent information to identify the respondent's background, such as gender, age, job position, years of work experience, company size, and sector type. Each section from Section B to Section G contains six questions focusing on specific skills. Section B relates to communication skills, Section C focuses on leadership skills, Section D assesses teamwork skills, Section E evaluates Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, Section F is about English language skills, and finally, Section G deals with problem-solving skills. With this structure, the questionnaire aims to gather relevant data to analyze employers' perceptions of the employability skills needed by graduates in the mechanical and construction industries.

To ensure the appropriateness and effectiveness of the research instrument, the researcher took the initiative to develop it by referring to various relevant sources including previous studies, journal articles, and academic books, carefully selected to align with the study's objectives. Table 1 provides details about the developed instrument.

Table 1 *Division of Items in the Survey Form*

Section	Element	Source	Label
A	Demographic Information	-	-
B	Communication Skills	(Taher dan Razak, 2022)	B1-B6
C	Leadership Skills	(Kalinggalan et al., 2023)	C1-C6
D	Teamwork Skills	(Sabri et al., 2022)	D1-D6
E	Information And Communication Technology (ICT) Skills	(Sivakumar et al., 2024)	E1-E6
F	English Language Skills	(Latif dan Hanifah, 2008)	F1-F6
G	Problem-Solving Skills	(Singh dan Singh, 2007)	G1-G6

3.3 Data Analysis

The researcher conducted data analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 27. This software allowed the researcher to process, analyze, and interpret the data obtained from the respondents. According to Creswell (2018), inferential statistics are used when research questions require testing for differences or relationships between variables.

In this study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to answer research questions. Descriptive statistics were employed to understand the respondents' profiles based on demographic data such as gender, age, job position, industry sector, and work experience. The analysis was carried out by calculating frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation. The mean and standard deviation were used to describe employers' perceptions of graduates' employability skills. For inferential statistics, the researcher used the Independent T-Test to determine the differences in perceptions between two groups of respondents: employers evaluating mechanical and construction graduates.

4. Result and discussion

The respondents in this study consisted of employees in the mechanical and construction industries, with a total of 70 participants. Detailed demographic information for the study participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Demographic Information of Respondents*

Demographics		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	29	41.4
	Female	41	58.6
	Total	**70**	100
Age	20 – 30 years	19	27.1

	31 – 40 years	21	30
	41 – 50 years	20	28.6
	51 years and above	10	14.3
	Total	**70**	100
Position	Manager	16	22.9
	Supervisor	37	52.9
	Human Resources	17	24.3
	Total	**70**	100
Industry Sector	Mechanical	43	61.4
	Construction	27	38.6
	Total	**70**	100
Work Experiences	3 – 6 years	22	31.4
	7 – 9 years	23	32.9
	10 – 11 years	13	18.6
	12 and above	12	17.1
	Total	**70**	100

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants in this study, categorized by gender, age, position, industry sector, and years of work experience. The demographic data show a balanced gender distribution, with 41.4% male respondents and 58.6% female respondents. Most participants fall within the age range of 31-40 years (30.0%), followed by those aged 41-50 years (28.6%). In terms of job position, most respondents are supervisors (52.9%), followed by those in human resources (24.3%) and managers (22.9%). Regarding the industry sector, most respondents are from the mechanical industry (61.4%), while 38.6% are from the construction industry. As for work experience, the highest proportion of participants have 7-9 years of work experience (32.9%), followed by 3-6 years (31.4%), and 10-11 years (18.6%). The data indicates that the respondents are experienced professionals from the mechanical and construction sectors, with a diverse range of industry experience.

The findings in this section are related to the level of employability skills proficiency among graduates in the mechanical field, based on six key elements: Leadership Skills, Communication Skills, Problem-Solving Skills, Teamwork Skills, ICT Skills, and English Language Skills. The data collected are presented in the form of tables, and average analysis is used to answer the research questions regarding the proficiency level of these skills.

Based on Table 3, the elements of Leadership Skills and Teamwork Skills each recorded a mean score of 3.38, indicating a proficiency level categorized as Medium-High. Similarly, Communication Skills, Problem-Solving Skills, and ICT Skills each recorded a mean score of 3.35, also reflecting a Medium-High level of proficiency. The employability skill with the lowest mean score is English Language Skills, with a mean score of 3.28, which is still categorized as Medium-High.

Table 3 *Overall analysis of the employability skills required by graduates (Mechanical Engineering)*

Element	Average	Level
Leadership Skills	3.38	Moderate-High
Teamwork Skills	3.38	Moderate-High
Communication Skills	3.35	Moderate-High
Problem-Solving Skills	3.35	Moderate-High
ICT skills	3.35	Moderate-High
English Language skills	3.28	Moderate-High
Overall Average	3.35	Moderate-High

Overall, the six employability skill elements studied are at a Moderate-High level, with an overall average of 3.35 and scores ranging from 3.28 to 3.38. This indicates that graduates' proficiency in employability skills is good, but still requires improvement, particularly in English language skills, which recorded the lowest average score among the elements studied.

Based on Table 4, the average values for each employability skill element indicate a nearly identical level of proficiency, with Teamwork Skills recording the highest average score of 3.30, followed by ICT Skills at 3.28, Problem-Solving Skills at 3.22, Leadership Skills at 3.19, English Language Skills at 3.17, and Communication Skills at 3.15. All elements are at a Moderate-High level.

Table 4 *Overall analysis of the employability skills required by graduates (Construction Engineering)*

Element	Average	Level
Teamwork Skills	3.30	Moderate-High
ICT Skills	3.28	Moderate-High
Problem-Solving Skills	3.22	Moderate-High
Leadership Skills	3.19	Moderate-High
English Language skills	3.17	Moderate-High
Communication Skills	3.22	Moderate-High
Overall Average	3.22	Moderate-High

Overall, the six employability skill elements studied are at a Moderate-High level, with an overall average of 3.22 and scores ranging from 3.15 to 3.30. This indicates that graduates already possess sufficient skills to meet industry requirements. However, there is still room for improvement in each element to reach a higher level and more comprehensively meet industry demands.

In this study, the differences in employers' perceptions regarding the employability skill elements required by graduates in the mechanical and construction fields were investigated. To determine the appropriate type of analysis, whether parametric or non-parametric, a normality test needs to be conducted using SPSS software. This test aims to assess whether the data follows a normal distribution. The normality of the data is evaluated based on the values of Skewness and Kurtosis obtained through descriptive analysis. Data is considered normal if the graph forms a bell-shaped curve, meaning it is high in the centre and declines at both ends (Chua, 2009). For samples with fewer than 200 respondents, the Skewness and Kurtosis values must fall within the range of -1.96 to +1.96 to be considered normal (Field, 2009). If the data is normal, parametric analysis can be used. On the other hand, if the data does not meet the normality condition, non-parametric analysis will be chosen. This ensures that the statistical techniques used are appropriate for the data's distribution.

Table 5 presents the values of Skewness and Kurtosis for each construct in this study, obtained from the normality test using descriptive analysis. According to George and Mallery (2019), data is considered normal if the Skewness value is between -1 and 1, while the Kurtosis value falls within the range of -2 to 2. Based on the Skewness and Kurtosis readings for this dataset, it indicates that the distribution is normal because all the values fall within the specified range.

Table 5 *Normality test for skewness and kurtosis values for each construct*

Elemen	Statistik	Statistik
Communication Skills	0.592	-0.370
Leadership Skills	0.818	0.101
Teamwork Skills	0.709	-0.189
ICT Skills	1.072	0.574
English Language Skills	0.907	0.584
Problem-Solving Skills	0.792	-0.267

In this study, an independent T-Test was used to analyze the difference in employer perceptions of the employability skills required by graduates in two industrial sectors, namely Mechanical and Construction. The hypothesis being tested is that there is no significant difference in employer perceptions regarding the employability skills required by graduates in these two sectors (H_{01}).

Overall, table 6 shows the results of the T-Test indicate that there is no significant difference in employer perceptions of the employability skills required by graduates in the Mechanical and Construction sectors. Therefore, the null hypothesis H_{01} is accepted for all the skill elements tested, which suggests that employer perceptions regarding communication, leadership, teamwork, ICT, English language, and problem-solving skills are similar between the two industrial sectors. This implies that both sectors may have similar priorities when assessing the employability skills of their graduates.

Table 6 *Independent T-Test result*

Element	Type of Industry	N	Min (M)	SP	t	df	P
Communication Skills	Mechanical	43	3.35	0.84	1.017	68	0.313
	Construction	27	3.15	0.72			

Leadership Skills	Mechanical	43	3.38	0.74	1.073	68	0.287
	Construction	27	3.19	0.73			
Teamwork Skills	Mechanical	43	3.38	0.78	0.446	68	0.657
	Construction	27	3.30	0.73			
ICT Skills	Mechanical	43	3.35	0.80	1.618	68	0.110
	Construction	27	3.04	0.71			
English Language Skills	Mechanical	43	3.28	0.68	0.660	68	0.511
	Construction	27	3.171	0.62			
Problem-Solving	Mechanical	43	3.35	0.78	0.675	68	0.502
	Construction	27	3.22	0.84			

5. Discussion

The results of the study indicate that employer perceptions of the employability skills of graduates in the mechanical field are at a moderate-high level for all the elements studied. The average scores obtained for each element show slight variation, but all fall within the moderate-high category. This study provides important insights into the skill requirements in the industry and how graduates can improve their employability to meet employer expectations.

Graduates' communication skills are considered good. However, they need to be improved to avoid technical misunderstandings and ensure the success of projects. Effective communication is a key element in team collaboration and problem-solving in technical contexts (Ahmad et al., 2022). Additionally, leadership skills are crucial in the mechanical field, where graduates who are skilled in leading teams can manage technical challenges, make strategic decisions, and ensure the success of projects, especially under pressure (Rasul et al., 2013). Furthermore, teamwork is essential in the mechanical sector, where graduates are expected to integrate expertise from various disciplines. While graduates are capable of working in teams, challenges such as conflict management and task distribution remain issues that need attention (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). Moreover, graduates skilled in ICT can use technology to perform tasks efficiently and professionally, especially in the mechanical field, which requires proficiency in technical software like CAD and MATLAB, as well as digital collaboration tools to enhance team coordination (Diokno & Peprah, 2021). In addition, proficiency in the English language is important in the mechanical industry for communicating with international clients, understanding technical documentation, and collaborating with multinational teams. Therefore, graduates need to improve their English language skills to meet the global demands of the industry (Suhaili & Mohama, 2021). Furthermore, graduates need to be exposed to more real-world-based training to improve their problem-solving skills, as this helps them identify issues, understand the root causes, and find practical solutions in complex situations (Lin, 2024).

In conclusion, employers view graduates in the mechanical field as having good employability skills. Showever, improvements are needed in leadership, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, ICT, and English language skills to ensure graduates can meet the challenges of an increasingly evolving industry (Hendrawan & Daryanto, 2019).

The study in the construction field shows that employers' perceptions of the employability skills of graduates are positive. Although most skill elements show a solid foundation, there is room for improvement in several areas to ensure graduates are better prepared to face more complex challenges.

For example, graduates in the construction field possess a good foundation in communication skills; however, they still need to improve them to ensure instructions, project progress, and changes are communicated clearly. Effective communication is crucial in avoiding confusion, delays, and additional costs in projects (Nahyan et al., 2019). Additionally, leadership skills in the construction field are also essential for leading teams and managing complex projects. Graduates need more exposure to practical experience to enhance their leadership skills, particularly in facing technical and logistical challenges, as well as in coordinating teams (Kasmuri et al., 2022; Rithe & Pachekar, 2021). As a follow-up, relevant industry-oriented training programs can help graduates practice leadership skills in real-world situations, thus ensuring they are better prepared to manage larger projects. Strong ICT skills are also necessary to cope with the advanced technology used in the construction industry. Graduates need to be trained in relevant design and project management software, such as CAD software and digital construction planning (Abba et al., 2021). Additionally, they should be proficient in using digital collaboration tools and digital project presentations to improve team coordination (Hecker & Loprest, 2019). Proficiency in English is another important aspect in the construction industry, as most documentation and communication in the industry are in English. Graduates need to improve their proficiency in technical and professional communication to face challenges in a global environment (Poedjiastutie, 2019). Better English skills will enhance their ability to communicate and manage projects more effectively, thus ensuring smooth information flow between all involved parties. Furthermore, graduates in the construction field need more exposure to situations requiring more complex and multidisciplinary problem-solving. A practical, industry-oriented approach, such as real-world case studies and project simulations, can help graduates develop more innovative and strategic problem-solving skills (Irfan et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that graduates in the construction field possess adequate employability skills to meet the basic requirements of the industry. However, there is a need for improvement in some skill areas to ensure that graduates are more competitive. Therefore, higher education institutions should emphasize practical aspects in their curricula and introduce project-based training to prepare graduates for the challenges of an increasingly complex construction industry (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2019).

The results of the independent T-Test conducted to examine the differences in employers' perceptions of the employability skills required by graduates in the mechanical and construction fields show no significant differences in the employability skills elements that were analyzed. This finding allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the differences in industry requirements and provides a clear picture of how skill requirements vary based on different industrial sectors. Overall, this decision indicates that although both fields are engineering-based, they have different skill focuses according to the employers' needs.

6. Conclusion

This study found that leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills are among the employability skills elements that received the highest mean scores in both the Mechanical and Construction sectors. Although there were slight differences in the mean scores between the two sectors, the results of the independent t-test indicate that these differences were not significant ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that both sectors have similar employability skill requirements, reflecting the importance of these elements in ensuring that graduates can contribute effectively to their organizations. Graduates who possess these skills at a higher level are expected to have a positive impact on productivity, collaboration, and work effectiveness in their respective industries.

Additionally, the findings also show that employers' perceptions of communication skills, leadership, teamwork, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills vary slightly between the Mechanical and Construction sectors. Although these differences exist, statistical tests found that the differences were not significant, thus reflecting that both sectors generally have similar skill expectations. Conversely, no significant differences were recorded in the perceptions of English language and problem-solving skills, indicating that employers in both sectors consistently value these skills and regard them as essential for graduates to master.
Although the test results show no significant differences between the Mechanical and Construction sectors in most employability skill elements, this study still provides an indication that each sector has its own priorities based on industry needs. This suggests that certain skills may be given more emphasis in one sector compared to the other, even though no significant differences were noted overall. Therefore, adjustments in curricula and skill training may be necessary to ensure that graduates can more effectively meet the specific needs of each industry.

The results of this study also highlight the role of educational institutions in strengthening graduates' employability skills. This includes integrating communication, leadership, ICT, and teamwork skills into the curriculum, as well as ensuring exposure to real-world work environments through industrial training. This approach can help graduates develop more relevant skills and meet employers' expectations in the Mechanical and Construction sectors. Furthermore, exposure to ICT and communication skills can be further expanded to ensure that graduates are able to compete in an increasingly fast-growing digitalized era. While English language skills are at a moderately high level, additional emphasis is still required due to their importance in global communication and cross-cultural interactions, especially in industries involving international collaboration and the use of technical documentation in English.

Overall, this study provides important guidance to educational institutions, graduates, and employers in understanding and enhancing employability skills. With the implementation of strategic measures tailored to the needs of the Mechanical and Construction sectors, graduates can be better prepared to face the challenges of an increasingly competitive and dynamic job market.

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