

Examining Malaysian Students' Life Experiences and their Employability upon Graduation

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Abstract

Purpose: The present study examined the relationship between Malaysian students' life experiences while studying at higher education institutions in Malaysia and their employability after graduation.

Design/methodology/approach: Using the cross-sectional method, 323 Malaysian graduates who graduated within three years upon graduation, both employed and unemployed, participated in this study. Since moving across the states was limited due to Malaysia Movement Control Order (MCO), the questionnaires were distributed using Google Form via Whatsapp (June-August 2021).

Findings: The present study found that Malaysian graduates' experiences of studying overseas, staying at the hostel campus, being active with extra-curricular activities, being committee members in organising programmes at national level and being committee members in organising programmes at international level during their studies were positively related to their employability.

Research limitations: This research studied only five (5) core factors on students' life experiences which may related to the chances of being highly employable after graduation. Future research should consider studying a few more factors on students' life experiences contributing to graduates' employability.

Practical implications: The implication is more on the recent students of higher education institutions. By knowing the significance of these five factors that can contribute to their employability, the current students should strive to follow these five factors that may increase their chances to be employed in the future.

Originality/value: This research is probably the first time that these five factors were studied empirically in the field of graduate employability. The results are important for the current students in the higher education institutions to realise the factors that may enhance their chances of employability.

Keywords:

Malaysian students and graduates, Students' life experiences, Graduates' employability

Introduction

The global graduate skills gap in the 21st Century has been considered as a global and significantly widespread issue. The QS Employer Survey 2018 and QS Applicant Survey 2018 highlighted a shortfall in skill attainment across the board, as well as a mismatch in expectations among students and employers (QS, 2018). Such findings may indicate that there is a communication barrier between universities and employers that needs to be addressed in order to bridge the skills gap. The findings of these surveys suggested that prospective students do not fully understand how employers value skills. How higher education institutions prepare students for employment, often referred to as the 'graduate skills gap' has been a topic much discussed in the academic literature (Stapleton, 2017; Lim, Lee, Yap & Ling, 2016; Chan, 2015; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Yunus & Li, 2005). There still appears to be a lack of an accepted best way to equip students with the necessary hard skills required for employment and even less discussion of how best to equip graduates with the soft skills needed in an ever-changing and disruptive job market (Cheng, Adekola, Albia, & Cai, 2021; Turner & Mulholland, 2017). Apparently, universities' tactics to produce a skilled workforce to secure employment in the market did not work well. Nonetheless, the blame cannot be put on the universities alone. Students themselves, during their studies, need to put the effort in order to improve themselves to be more marketable to the employers.

Graduates' employability has been an issue a decade ago in Malaysia. It has been reported that university students have been lacking certain skills such as soft skills especially problem solving and communication skills (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014) and hard skills such as lack of technical knowledge, difficulty in applying knowledge, and lack of English communication skills (Lim, Teck, Ching & Chui, 2016). Mismatch of skills is also reported as another cause of unemployability of Malaysian graduates whereby it was reported that about 30,000

graduates worked in a field that does not match with their higher educational qualifications (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014). According to a recent Malaysian Ministry of Education report, only 53 percent of the 273,373 graduates in 2015 secured employment within six months of graduation, 24 per cent of graduates were unemployed and 18 percent engaged in tertiary studies (Shanmugam, 2017). The 53 percent secured employment cited that there was a mismatch between the training provided at universities and skillsets required by employers. Most university curriculum does not reflect the current skill requirements (Shanmugam, 2017). The 2020 Graduate Tracer Study conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) recorded the graduate employability rate at 84.4 per cent, down slightly from 86.2 per cent in 2019, a decline of 1.8 per cent, said its Minister Datuk Seri Dr Noraini Ahmad, in which the expectation is to employ 75% freshly graduates upon their graduation (Malaymail, 2021). The Minister added that COVID-19 pandemic has impacted economic sectors in which less new jobs were being offered. Prior to 2020, the unemployment rate of Malaysia's youth in Malaysia was under the global average of 13% but exceeded the unemployment rate of the adult working population (aged 25-64) by a relatively high factor of six (compared to the global average of three) (DOSM, 2021; Lee & Zhang, 2021).

Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has been taking proactive actions in making sure that graduates from higher education institutions are employed. Every year MOHE collect data from all the tertiary education institutions to know the current situations of the graduates: either they are employed, currently searching for jobs, furthering their studies, becoming entrepreneurs, following industrial training, taking holidays or others (DOSM, 2021). MOHE is currently conducting many programmes for the Malaysia graduates to be more employable (MOHE, 2021). Among the programmes are Strategic Plan of Graduates Employability 2021-2021; PENJANA-CAP (Career Advancement Programme) to improve skills of graduates; Higher Education Institution (HEI) Entrepreneurship Action Plan 2021-2025 to assist graduates post COVID-19; GREaT (Graduates Reference Hub for Employment and Training) portal to help graduates to register themselves with MOHE upon graduation, share various information, and link them with companies looking for employees, and many more programmes.

While MOHE and higher education institutions are occupied with designing programmes to assist graduates in being employed, now it is time for the students to realise that they must prepare themselves to be more visible and marketable to employers during their studies. This article focuses on students' life experiences that may lead to high chances of being employed upon graduation. The present study examined experiences that students may acquire during their studies to increase their value as highly employable graduates.

Research Objectives

The present study list down five main objectives which are related to students' life experiences while studying at higher education institutions, which could lead to high chances of being employed upon their graduation. The list of objectives of the study are:

- i. To investigate the association between overseas study experience and graduates' employability.
- ii. To study the association between staying at campus hostel experience and graduates' employability.
- iii. To study the relationship between experience of being active students with extra-curricular activities and graduates' employability.
- iv. To investigate the link between the experience of being committee members in organising programmes at national level and graduates' employability.
- v. To study the connection between experience of being committee members in organising programmes at international level and graduates' employability.

Literature Review and the Proposed Association between the Latent Variables

There are almost non-existence empirical studies on the relationships between students' life experiences and their employability upon graduation. The literature review below indicates how lacking of empirical studies on this topic. Thus, it gives the warrant to start empirical studies on this topic, which will enhance the literature in the field of graduate employability.

Overseas Study Experience

Students may learn the best practices across the national boundaries via interacting with diverse people. The students acquire skills overseas are the critical elements that may help them to secure a suitable job in a dynamic market (Brooks & Waters, 2011). An overseas educational experience can improve the students' employment prospects (Coleman, 2011). There is a massive difference in the local and international students' knowledge, skills, and mindset. Further, the market mechanism attracts the human capital that holds international exposure and provides fair employment opportunities (Alfranseder, Escrivá, Fellingner, Haley, Nigmonov, & Taivere, 2012). The majority of the students believe that their versatility increases during mobility. Resilience and open-mindedness are the key factors that can be traced among the students holding overseas study experience. Moreover, self-efficacy and risk-taking abilities make them confident in overcoming complex conditions (European Commission, 2018). Therefore, students believe that participating in mobility programs positively affects their personal development (Alamo-Vera, Hernandez-Lopez, Ballesteros-Rodriguez, & Saa-Perez, 2020). QS Report asserted that the sizeable number of employers worldwide gives weightage to the international experience while assessing graduates' job applications (QS, 2016).
H₁: Experience of studying overseas is positively associated with the graduates' employability.

Experience of Staying in Campus Hostel

The exposure to campus life while residing in a hostel away from home always enlightened students' inquisitive minds and provided lively experiences. Campus life promotes compassion, teamwork, and decision making attributes among students, which enable them to confront and resolve complex problems in their personal and professional lives. The hostel life provides students with a chance to learn from the experiences of others and teach them a life-long lesson of empathy (Iftikhar & Ajmal, 2015). Further, students' campus life experiences make them strong to manage their workload and solve their issues with scarce resources. Consequently, students become selfless during campus life, which is a building block of a civilized society.

H₂: Experience of staying in campus hostel is positively associated with graduates' employability

Experience of being Active with Extra-curricular Activities

Students that participate in extra-curricular activities are generally pleased with their experience. Students have very specific motivations for participating in a particular activity, which is often linked to improving their job chances. Those that participate in any extra-curricular activities reported to have more defined career goals and a high level of self-awareness and knowledge of employer expectations (Divan & McBurney, 2016). Extra-curricular participation is an important part of students' personal development. Students participate in these activities for a variety of reasons, including amusement, socialization, and pleasure, but most importantly, to acquire and develop abilities.

H₃: Experience of being active with extra-curricular activities is positively associated with graduates' employability

Experience of being Committee Members in Organising Programmes at National Level

Being a committee member of a programme will give the students the opportunity to become engaged and connect with other students, which will lead to improved learning and growth. The most significant source of impact on a student's academic and personal growth is his or her peer group. By identifying with a peer group, a student's emotional and cognitive development, as well as his or her conduct, may be influenced. By working together with other individuals organising programmes at the national level, students learn to cooperate, communicate, resolve conflict, and lead. Thus, students are capable enough to digest the essence of critical thinking, intellectual and academic proficiencies, and time management for securing their future employment.

H₄: Experience of being committee members in organising programmes at national level is positively associated with graduates' employability

Experience of being Committee Members in Organising Programmes at International Level

Organising and participating in sports clubs, societies, volunteering, and part-time work is a great way to meet new people while also enjoying your time at university. It also helps students maintain a healthy balance between their academics and their social lives, which is essential for success. However, it will also make them stronger candidates for employment by providing them with a wealth of real-world examples that they can use in their job applications in demonstrating their abilities. Extracurricular activities help students to learn about themselves as well as develop and apply their skills and knowledge in a variety of situations. By joining as a committee member in conducting programmes, especially at international level, will make them experience different exposures of dealing with people from different countries and cultures.

H₅: Experience of being committee members in organising programmes at international level is positively related to graduates' employability

Methodology

Using the cross-sectional method, 323 Malaysian graduates graduated from the 20 Malaysian public universities during the last five years upon their graduation; both employed and unemployed participated in this study. Respondents within five years of graduation were chosen because they can still recall their experiences studying at higher education institutions. Moreover, because of the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020, physical classes were replaced with online classes. Most students were shifted to stay at home, and very few stayed at the hostel campus until the present questionnaires were distributed (June-August 2021). Therefore, students who graduated in 2020 and until August 2021 had limited experience of staying in campus hostel. In addition, they also had less experience in conducting or participating in activities physically since all physical gatherings were not allowed. Thus, the decision to select respondents who graduated within the last five years of their graduation was considered wise to be made. Purposive sampling was used because this technique addresses the subjects who can provide information relevant to the topic being researched (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

The target population of the present study was Malaysian graduates from the twenty public universities. Based on MOHE (2020) statistics, total number of graduated local students were 114,709 graduates (2020); 128,418 graduates (2019); 119,345 graduates (2018); 119,558 graduates (2017), and 114,350 graduates (2016). Thus, the total population was 596,380 graduates.

The self-administered questionnaires were disseminated from June 2021 to August 2021, during the abnormal shift in the Covid-19 pandemic cases in Malaysia. Due to the enforcement of the Movement Control Order in the Malaysian States, it was too challenging for the researcher to gather data physically. Henceforth, participants of the present study were rightly approached to fill in Google form via WhatsApp. The use of WhatsApp to respond to a questionnaire is common in Malaysia. Henceforth, the questionnaires were distributed via WhatsApp to the former students of the researcher of the present study to 300 Malaysian graduates who had graduated from Malaysian public universities during the last five years. The present study administered the snowball technique via WhatsApp. The former students were requested to float the questionnaires with their friends throughout Malaysia who had graduated during the last five years. With this snowball effect, the researchers of the present study estimated 600 questionnaires, which brought in a response rate of 53.8%. All questionnaires were useable for analysis. The questionnaire enquired the respondents about their age, gender, either currently employed or unemployed and questions on the five core factors of students' life experiences: (i) either they had overseas study experience, (ii) either they had an experience of staying in the campus hostel during their studies, (iii) either they had an experience of being active with extra-curricular activities during their studies, (iv) either they had an experience of being committee members organizing programmes at the national level and also (v) either they had an experience of being committee members organising programmes at the international level. The answer options for the five core factors of students' life experiences are "Yes" or "No". The results of these questions are presented in Table 1.

Results and Discussion

Overall, 323 respondents participated in this study; all of them were Malaysian graduates who had graduated from Malaysian public universities. The respondents graduated within the last five (5) years upon their graduation. The respondents were both employed (52.9%) and unemployed (47.1%) at the time they answered the questionnaire. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents and the five (5) questions that were asked in the questionnaire.

The present study examined the link of demographic variables with graduate employability through a simple linear regression (Sekaran, 2003). The simple linear regression was administered with one categorical variable with several categories in SPSS 23 version (Lawal & Lawal, 2003). The association of the categorical variables with the continuous variable was investigated via creating dummy variables in the SPSS. The current study administered the significance of the estimated paths with the critical value of 1.64 at a 5% error probability. The subsequent tables discuss the findings in detail.

Table 1 Demographic Data of Respondents

Variable	N	Percentage (%)
Age		
20-22	113	35.00
23-25	136	42.10
26-28	40	12.40
29-30	8	2.50
Above 30	26	8.00
Gender		
Male	87	26.90
Female	236	73.10
Race		
Malays	207	64.09
Chinese	79	24.46
Indians	28	8.67
Others	09	2.78
Employment Status		
Employed	171	52.90
Unemployed	152	47.10
Level of Study		
Undergraduate	275	85.15
Master's Degree	36	11.15
PhD	12	3.70
Overseas Study Experience		
Yes	35	10.80
No	288	89.20
Campus Study Experience		
Yes	284	87.91
No	39	12.10
Experience as Active students in Extra-Curricular Activities		
Yes	216	66.90
No	107	33.10
Experience as Committee Members in Organizing Programmes at National Level		
Yes	230	71.20
No	93	28.80
Experience as Committee Members in Organizing Programmes at International Level		
Yes	97	30.00
No	226	70.00

Table 2
Regression Results (Experience of Overseas Study)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	P value
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	With overseas study experience	3.747	.113		33.032	p<0.01
	Without overseas study experience	.011	.121	.005	.088	p>0.01

a. DV: Graduate Employability

Table 2 elucidates the relationship between overseas study experiences with graduates' employability ($t=33.03$, $p<0.01$). The results unveiled the significant association between the overseas studies experience and graduates' employability. It means those graduates who have overseas study experience enjoy better employability chances in Malaysia. Contrary, the respondents deprived of overseas study experience showed insignificant association with graduate employability.

Table 3
Regression Results (Campus study experience)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	P value
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	With campus study experience	3.758	.042		89.416	p<0.01
	Without campus study experience	-.018	.121	-.008	-.149	p>0.01

a. DV: Graduate Employability

The findings in Table 3 demonstrate the relationship between the campus study experiences with the graduates' employability. Further, the findings exposed the significant relationship between campus study experiences and graduates' employability in Malaysia ($t=89.41$, $p<0.01$). Moreover, respondents who did not avail campus study exposure reveal an insignificant relationship with graduates' employability.

Table 4
Regression results (Active Students in Extra-Curricular Activities)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	P value
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Active students	3.807	.048		79.402	p<0.01
	In-active students	-.153	.083	-.102	-1.841	p>0.01

a. DV: Graduate Employability

The findings in Table 4 unveiled the significant relationship between the active students in extra-curricular activities and graduates' employability ($t=79.40$, $p<0.01$). Moreover, the reported numbers revealed the insignificant relationship between the in-active students in extra-curricular activities and graduates' employability.

Table 5
Regression results
(Being Committee Members in Organizing Programmes at National Level)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	P value
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Yes	3.780	.047		81.030	p<0.01
	No	-.081	.087	-.052	-.936	p>0.01

a. DV: Graduate Employability

The findings in Table 5 demonstrated the significant relationship between being the committee members in organizing programmes at the national level during studies and graduates' employability ($t=81.03$, $p<0.01$). On the other side, those respondents who had not involved as committee members in organizing programmes at the national level during studies showed an insignificant relationship with graduates' employability.

Table 6
Regression results
(Being Committee Members in Organizing Programmes at International Level)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	P value
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Yes	4.019	.070		57.627	p<0.01
	No	-.376	.083	-.244	-4.510	p>0.01

a. DV: Graduate Employability

The results in Table 6 demonstrated the significant relationship between being committee members in organizing programmes at the international level during studies and graduates' employability ($t=57.62$, $p<0.01$). Contrary, those respondents who never had experiences of being committee members in organizing programmes at the international level during studies showed an insignificant relationship with graduates' employability.

Conclusion and Discussion

The present study investigated students' employability in the Malaysian market based on the five factors on students' life experiences: overseas study experience, campus study experience, experience as active students in extra-curricular activities, experience as committee members in organising programmes at the national level, and experience as committee members in organising programmes at international level. There may be a few detours and dead ends in students' life after their graduation. The present study's findings suggest viable solution for the current students in higher education institutions especially in Malaysia in order to be more marketable to employers.

First, the present study found that graduates who hold overseas study experience avail enormous employability options in the Malaysian market. This finding is parallel with Brooks and Waters (2011) and Coleman (2011). Graduates with international exposure during their studies would acquire more skills and experiences compared to those graduates who did not have chances to have international exposure. Graduates with overseas study experience probably have increased their confidence level dealing with people from different cultures and background and this usually shown in their attitudes and attributes. This value added in their personality attract employers to hire them. Thus, students with overseas study experience have higher chances to be employed.

Second, the present study results revealed that experience of staying in the campus hostel widely contributed to graduates' employability in the Malaysian job market. Malaysian students mostly preferred to stay in the campus hostel during their studies due to hostel facilities, room safety, hostel safety, distance from hostel to the classes, and cost saving (Khozaei, Ayub, Hassan & Khozaie, 2010). However, usually the rooms offered in the campus are limited. Thus, students need to compete with each other to ensure accommodation on the campus for the next coming study year. For example, at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), students need to collect points by participating in extra-curricular activities. If students are holding positions in the organising committee members of organising programmes, events, or projects, the higher the points they collect. USM usually put a minimum number of points that students need to collect to secure campus accommodation. Due to this, students who have experience of staying on the campus during their studies in Malaysia are actually the ones who are active students, and the chances for them to be employed upon their graduation are actually higher than those who do not.

Third, the present study found that graduates with experiences of being active in extra-curricular activities during their studies remained more successful in getting jobs upon their graduation. As mentioned by Divan and McBurney (2016), graduates who were active in extra-curricular activities had defined career goals and a high degree of self-awareness and knowledge. These qualities attract employers to hire graduates who were active with extra-curricular activities during their studies in the higher education institutions.

Fourth and final, those graduates who had experiences as committee members in organising programmes at the national and international levels programmes during their studies showed a high tendency of enjoying employability in the Malaysian job market. Graduates with experiences as committee members organising programmes at national and international levels definitely are exposed to ways of planning, organising, leading, and controlling the many

elements of programmes to be successful ones. They indirectly upgrade their soft skills, and this will increase their value-added as employable graduates to the employers' eyes.

Practical and Social Implications

The study's implications are limited but hold great importance for the students to secure better employability options in the market. The implication is more on the current students of higher education institutions. By knowing the importance of these five factors that can contribute to their employability, current students of the higher education institutions should strive to follow these five factors that may increase their chances to be employed in the future. The present study's findings would improve students' economic conditions in the future and provide a valuable human resource supply to the employers in the nowadays competitive market.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study asked Malaysian graduates a few questions regarding their students' life while studying at national and private high education institutions in Malaysia. The respondents of the present study were those who graduated within the last five years of their graduation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents who graduated in 2019, 2020 and 2021 probably had less experiences as students living on the campus. This may have some effect on the results of the present study.

The present study recommends future research to study more factors of students' life experiences that may contribute to their chances of being employed upon their graduation. Factor such as being active in joining as participants in programmes conducted at the national and international levels that graduates can participate during their studies needs to be studied. The respondents of the present study were graduates from public universities in Malaysia. Future research is recommended to invite graduates from private universities, colleges, polytechnics, and vocational institutions to be the respondents of the study.

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