

# Malaysian Employer Perceptions About Local and Foreign MBA Graduates

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In the mid-1990s, the Malaysian economy experienced an economic boom. At the same time, the demand for higher education increased tremendously. In the late 1990s, the country had more than 500 private institutions of higher learning offering a myriad of courses, ranging from the certificate level (i.e., postsecondary school education) to the degree level in collaboration with local and foreign colleges and universities. In 1995, there were only 10 public universities in the country, but by the year 2002 there were already 17 public universities and 10 private universities. The stupendous growth of the education sector was attributed to the sizeable number of young people in the nation's population and the perceived value of education as an "international passport" for success in one's career, particularly in the field of business management.

In 1995, there were only 8 public universities offering postgraduate degrees such as the master's degree in business administration (MBA), but currently (2002) there are more than 50 different types of MBAs offered by both public and private universities. There are also private educational institutions that have links with foreign and local universities or institutions and that market these programs as "twinning" or "franchise" programs. Consequently, two types of graduates dominate the supply of MBAs in

**ABSTRACT.** In this article, the authors examine employer perceptions of local and foreign MBA graduates along with the problems encountered and factors considered important in hiring them. Based on a sample of 91 respondents, the findings show significant differences in perceptions of local and foreign MBA graduates, as well as significant differences in employers' perceptions regarding the problems encountered with local and foreign MBAs. The key factors considered important in hiring MBA graduates included decision-making ability, written communication, oral communication, analytical skills, and interpersonal skills. The authors discuss the implications of their findings.

Malaysia: the local and foreign MBAs. The local MBAs obtain their degrees from Malaysian universities, whereas the foreign MBAs are Malaysians who have obtained their degrees from foreign universities, either while studying abroad or through foreign linkages in Malaysia.

From the institutional perspective, the competition for MBA students appears to be intense. Various institutions, both public and private, have been attracting potential MBAs by promoting the differences among their offerings in terms of curriculum, delivery style (full-time versus part-time, examination versus coursework, modular versus classroom style, etc.), tuition fees, quality of education, prestige, and international recogni-

tion. The intensity of competition has been even greater among private universities and private institutions given franchises by foreign universities (namely universities in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Competition among the public universities has been less intense, as instruction in most of these universities has been primarily in Malay (the national language) instead of English. Although some public universities offer the MBA in English, these are not widely known to the general public. Furthermore, many public universities only offer limited places in their MBA programs.

The economic crisis in 1997 greatly increased the demand for higher education, particularly the MBA. With a slowing economy, many Malaysians perceived that the best strategy would be to go back to graduate school. The supply of MBA graduates is expected to increase in the near future, in anticipation of better economic growth. However, the dual supply of MBAs (i.e., the local and the foreign) has raised several questions. What are employers' perceptions of the local and foreign MBA graduates? What are the problems faced by employers with regard to the differences, if any, between local and foreign MBAs? What are the key factors considered important in hiring them? These questions are critical, given that educa-



tion providers could modify their programs to respond to the concerns raised by the employers.

Therefore, in this study we sought to examine employers' perceptions of local and foreign MBA graduates, identify the problems encountered by employers in recruiting them, and determine the key factors considered critical in hiring them.

Several researchers have attempted to identify the potential mismatch between the skills and attributes of graduates of tertiary institutions and employer expectations (Aiken, Martin, & Paolillo, 1994; Eberhardt & Moser, 1997; Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990; Raymond, McNabb, & Matthaehi, 1993; Tanyel, Mitchell, & McAlum, 1999).

Edge (1985) found that personnel managers ranked "communication skills" as the most important, followed by "the ability to work with others" and "the ability to plan, develop, organize and coordinate." The other skills and attributes considered important by employers were interpersonal skills (Down & Liedtka, 1994; Eberhardt & Moser, 1997; Kane, 1993; Ray & Stallard, 1994; Raymond et al., 1993); oral and written communication skills (Aiken et al., 1994; Down & Liedtka, 1994; Eberhardt & Moser, 1997; Kane, 1993; Peterson, 1997; Ray & Stallard, 1994; Raymond et al., 1993; Tanyel, et al., 1999); listening skills (Ray & Stallard, 1994); getting along with others (Aiken et al., 1994); self-motivation (Down & Liedtka, 1994; Raymond et al., 1993); leadership skills (Eberhardt & Moser, 1997); dependability (Aiken et al., 1994; Raymond et al., 1993); and initiative, problem-solving ability, and creative thinking (Aiken et al., 1994). Ray and Stallard (1994) also found that human resource managers were concerned with job-related technical skills, human relations skills, problem-solving skills, knowledge of software applications, and knowledge of office information systems. Asian CEOs wanted MBA graduates to be strong in creativity and innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurial, communication, and strategic planning skills (Fung, 1995). Hamid, Salleh, Muhammad, and Ismail (1983) found that the "human relations skill" was the major organizational requirement of a manager. This

was followed by "technical skills," "analytical skills," "oral ability," and "conceptual skills." The least important requirement was "writing ability." Employers also believed that management programs in Malaysian universities and colleges were too theoretical and did not incorporate the desired balance of practical realism into the curriculum. Furthermore, locally trained graduates were not adequately prepared to assume managerial positions because of inadequate technical skills and poor verbal communication skills. In another study, the top 10 skills required by managers were technical skills, creativity and resourcefulness, interpersonal skills, business communication skills, analytical skills, goal-oriented team-player skills, flexibility and resourcefulness, decision-making skills, and leadership skills (Mohd Nazari & Sharon Ann, 1996). Md. Zabid and Samsinar (1996) found that both the private and public sector employers have different perceptions of Malaysian graduates. The public sector has a better perception of local graduates than the private sector. Prospective employers also have high expectations for communication skills, initiative, and proficiency in the English language. The public sector has higher expectations for creativity, initiative, and communication skills. Employers in both the public and private sectors have low expectations regarding extracurricular activities and physical appearance.

These studies showed the importance of certain skills and attributes required in hiring business graduates. These skills and attributes were considered essential by employers and students (Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990; Raymond et al., 1993).

On the other hand, Ulinski and O'Callaghan (2002) found significant differences both between employers and students and among the students themselves, regarding their perceptions of the importance of oral communication skills. Tanyel et al. (1999) also found significant differences between prospective employers and university faculty members in their perception of the relative importance of attributes. Prospective employers placed greater importance on oral communication, decision-making and analytical ability, written communi-

cation, and creativity and creative writing, whereas university faculty members attached greater importance to ethical values, project management, and persuasive ability. Human resource (HR) professionals also viewed MBA graduates as more textbook oriented and lacking real-world experience (Rau, 1996). Almost 80% believed that the graduates needed to complement their education with real-world experience. MBA graduates were found to lack communication skills, have unrealistic expectations regarding job responsibilities and salary levels, and display arrogance and unwillingness to learn. On the positive side, HR professionals liked MBA holders' well-rounded background in business and their energy and enthusiasm (Rau). In Taiwan, employers believed that local MBAs have a theoretical bias, lack practical training, are impatient, possess poor coordination and communication training, have an elitist attitude, and lack teamwork and leadership training (Liu, 1989). Management graduates were also found to be lacking in oral communication skills, human relationship skills, decision-making ability, leadership ability, entrepreneurial spirit, and a global view (Lin, Wu, & Hung, 1992, cited in Hsu, M. L. A., 1996). On the other hand, Han (1995, cited in Hsu, M. L. A., 1996) found that 80% of the respondents in a study considered that MBA graduates were superior to other new employees in logical thinking and professional knowledge. About 75% of the respondents considered the working ability of local MBA graduate to be equal to that of overseas MBA graduates.

Previous studies have indicated many areas of concern and problems for graduates in business studies. With the plethora of MBAs in the Malaysian market, we believe that these issues should be reviewed so that action can be taken to improve the program offerings to better respond to employers' needs.

## Method

We developed a structured questionnaire based on previous studies that were mentioned above. We asked the respondents to rate each of 15 items on perceptions of local and foreign MBA graduates on a 5-point interval scale



ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). We also asked them to rate each of 14 items relating to problems encountered with MBAs on a scale ranging from 1 (*very serious problem*) to 5 (*no problem*) and each of 12 factors considered important in hiring MBAs on an interval scale ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*).

We conducted an internal consistency test for each of the sections. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.9003 for employers' perceptions of local MBA graduates, 0.9135 for employers' perceptions of foreign MBA graduates, 0.9376 for the problems encountered with local MBA recruits, 0.9307 for the problems encountered with foreign MBA recruits, and 0.8205 for the factors considered important in hiring MBAs. These results suggest a high level of internal consistency in the responses.

We selected a total of 600 organizations from the "Graduate Guide" directory, which provides a comprehensive guideline on career opportunities in various organizations in the private sector, and sent questionnaires to the human resource managers. We randomly selected only those organizations located in the capital city (Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley). The questionnaire was self-administered by the respondents. To enhance the response rate, we contacted respondents through e-mail and telephone calls. After 2 months, 131 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of approximately 22%. In this article, we analyzed responses only from those who had employed MBA graduates ( $N = 91$ ).

In Table 1, we present the respondent profile. About 65% of the respondents were managers in various organizations. Nearly 55% were in the human resource department, 23% were in the finance and accounting departments, and 10% were in sales and marketing. Nearly 73% of the respondents had over 3 years of experience in their present positions. Nearly 42% of the total respondents were in the financial services sector, 17.6% were in professional services, 13% were in trading, and 7.7% were in manufacturing.

**TABLE 1. Respondents' Profile ( $N = 91$ )**

	Frequency	%
Job title		
Director/Manager/General Manager	59	64.8
Executive	32	35.6
Functional area		
Human resources	50	54.9
Finance/accounting	21	23.1
Sales and marketing	9	9.9
Operations/production	4	4.4
Information systems/computing	3	3.3
Research and development	1	1.1
Others	3	3.3
Years in present position		
< 3	34	37.4
3-5	23	25.3
6-10	26	28.6
> 10 years	8	8.8
Qualifications		
Diploma	10	11
Degree	68	74.8
Professional	13	14.3
Age		
< 30	27	29.7
30-40	48	52.7
> 40	16	17.6
Type of industry		
Finance, insurance, and banking	38	41.8
Professional services	16	17.6
Manufacturing	7	7.7
Trading/services	12	13.2
Information, communication, and technology (ICT)	7	7.7
Others	11	12.1
Type of company		
Multinational corporations	20	22
Local companies	71	78

## Findings and Discussion

### *Employers' Perceptions of Local and Foreign MBA Graduates*

In Table 2, we show the employers' perceptions of local and foreign MBA graduates. The paired *t* test showed significant differences in the perceptions about local and foreign MBAs. There were significant differences in perceptions of sociability, aggressiveness, proficiency of English language, independence, and communication skills (significant at  $p < .001$ ). We also found significant differences in the perceptions regarding initiative, creativity, good blend of theory and practice, knowledge, understanding of general management practices, and analytical skills (significant at  $p < .01$ ) and rational and logical thinking ability ( $p < .05$ ).

We found that the mean score was higher for the foreign graduates compared with the local MBAs. Therefore, employers perceived foreign MBAs to be better prepared than local MBAs. This perception may be related to the attitude that foreign products are better than locally made ones. Furthermore, in previous decades (the 1970s through the 1990s), many Malaysians whose academic performance was excellent at the secondary school level went abroad to obtain their undergraduate degrees. They were granted scholarships to pursue their studies overseas. Those who did not excel in their studies at the secondary school level pursued higher education locally. However, after the 1997 crisis, the Malaysian government reduced its support as the educational funds were limited. The number of Malaysians going abroad dwindled.

**TABLE 2. Employers' Perceptions of Local and Foreign MBAs: Mean and Paired Test**

Employers' perceptions	Local MBAs (M)	Foreign MBAs (M)	t value
1. Very sociable	3.23	3.68	5.40***
2. Aggressive	3.18	3.58	6.10***
3. Well mannered	3.43	3.44	0.17
4. High initiative	3.46	3.71	3.44**
5. Pleasant personality	3.38	3.45	1.35
6. Adequate proficiency of English language	3.11	4.00	10.34***
7. Highly creative	3.16	3.46	3.58**
8. Rational and logical thinking	3.46	3.64	2.55*
9. Good analytical skills	3.51	3.78	3.21**
10. High commitment	3.32	3.43	1.53
11. Very independent	3.28	3.83	6.41***
12. Good communication skills	3.26	3.91	7.72***
13. Good blend of theory and practice	3.45	3.68	3.44**
14. Well-rounded understanding of general management practices	3.52	3.69	3.15**
15. Knowledgeable	3.55	3.78	3.34**

Note. Rating scale anchors were 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*indifferent*), 4 (*agree*), and 5 (*strongly agree*).

\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**TABLE 3. Problems of Local and Foreign MBAs: Mean and Paired Test**

Problems	Local MBAs (M)	Foreign MBAs (M)	t value
1. Leadership quality	4.16	4.59	3.75***
2. Practical experience	4.02	4.39	3.13**
3. Writing ability	3.93	4.54	4.51**
4. General knowledge and awareness of current issues	4.22	4.42	1.97*
5. Ability to work independently	4.44	4.69	2.33*
6. Analytical skills	4.55	4.59	0.45
7. Motivation and drive	4.37	4.62	2.70**
8. English language competency	3.93	4.59	5.84***
9. Self-confidence	4.24	4.65	3.82***
10. Oral ability	4.27	4.59	2.67**
11. Conceptual skills	4.43	4.62	2.19*
12. Socializing ability	4.43	4.69	2.82**
13. Teamwork	4.43	4.50	0.82
14. Computer literacy	4.50	4.57	1.09

Note. Rating scale anchors were 1 (*very serious problem*), 2 (*serious problem*), 3 (*minor problem*), 4 (*very minor problem*), and 5 (*no problem*).

\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Consequently, the Malaysian government liberalized and democratized the education sector by inviting foreign institutions to provide tertiary education in the country, which led to the rapid introduction of foreign MBAs in

Malaysia. However, the attitude that foreign MBAs are better than local ones persisted, although many of these degrees were obtained locally under the "twinning" or "franchise" programs. Many employers were also not aware

that students had the possibility of obtaining a foreign degree without going abroad. Some employers could not distinguish between a foreign MBA obtained in Malaysia and one obtained overseas. This difference is visible in the academic transcript and not in the academic certificate, which is rarely requested by the employer.

#### *Problems Encountered with Local and Foreign MBA Graduates*

In Table 3, we show the problems encountered by employers in hiring local and foreign MBAs. The paired *t* test showed that there were significant differences on the dimensions of leadership qualities, English language competency, and self-confidence (significant at  $p < .001$ ). We also found significant differences on items related to practical experience, writing ability, motivation and drive, oral communication ability, socializing ability (significant at  $p < .01$ ), general knowledge, ability to work independently, and conceptual skills (significant at  $p < .05$ ).

The mean score of the foreign MBAs was higher than that of the local graduates, underscoring the degree to which employers' perceptions of local graduates differ from their perceptions of foreign MBAs. One of the main concerns of the employers was related to communication skills, namely competency in English language and writing ability. Many employers have mentioned this issue, but public universities in Malaysia are unable to resolve it. The main issue is that public universities, subject to the national education policy, teach courses in Malay (national language), whereas the Malaysian business sector uses English as the language of transaction. Poor writing skills were also attributed to the fact that many public institutions use the "objective" (multiple-choice tests) mode of evaluation in the examination system and make minimal use of the subjective form requiring essay-type answers. Consequently, many local graduates have limited opportunity to communicate effectively. These problems begin at the primary and secondary school level and would require a significant amount of time to overcome. We should also note that



those who pursued their MBAs locally generally did their undergraduate studies locally. Only a small proportion of the foreign-educated graduates pursued their undergraduate studies in the local public universities. Thus, locally educated students dominate the supply of local MBAs.

#### *Factors Considered Important in Hiring MBAs*

We used factor analysis to identify the key factors considered important in hiring MBAs. Because there was no similar previous factor analytic research done to determine the key factors or dimensions in hiring MBAs, we used an exploratory factor analysis to determine the key factors. Factor analysis helped to reduce the 12 items into interpretable factors. We selected the principal component solution with the varimax rotation to rotate the factors to an orthogonal solution. We selected only those factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00, and the 12 items resulted in 4 factors. In Table 4, we show the key factors that were considered important by employers in hiring MBAs. These four factors accounted for 66.04% of the variances explained.

Factor 1 may be interpreted as "managerial skills" and accounted for 18.18% of the variances explained. In this factor, there were high loadings on leadership and interpersonal skills. However, decision-making ability appeared to be loaded more on this factor than the other groups. This factor was interpreted as managerial skills because the items loaded in it are related to key organizational management aspects such as leadership, human relations, and decision making. These are some of the major skills identified in management literature. This finding is also consistent with the findings of Tanyel et al. (1999) and Eberhardt and Moser (1997).

Factor 2 accounted for an additional 16.86% of the variances explained and can be interpreted as "technical/academic skills," which include technical and scholastic achievement. The two items loaded in this factor suggest the importance of having a good knowledge of the subject matter or contents of a particular job or work area. Technical skills imply

**TABLE 4. Principal Component Solution of Key Dimensions in Hiring MBAs**

Key dimensions	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Leadership skills	0.869			
Interpersonal skills	0.850			
Decision-making ability	0.431	0.384		0.424
Technical skills		0.840		
Scholastic achievement		0.800		
Extracurricular activities			0.767	
Written communication			0.598	0.545
Financial skills	0.512		0.563	
Analytical skills		0.415	0.538	0.420
Oral communication	0.304		0.490	0.478
Previous work experience				0.772
Teamwork skills		0.455		0.545
Percentage of variances explained	18.180	16.686	15.721	15.453
Cumulative percentage of variances explained	18.180	34.866	50.587	66.040
Eigenvalues	4.245	1.348	1.203	1.129

*Note.* Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy: 0.767.  
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-square value is 365.687 (significant at  $p < .001$ ).

that the person has a thorough understanding of a particular subject, whereas scholastic achievement suggests that the person is academically qualified on that subject. This may explain why many organizations begin processing potential applicants by first looking at their academic achievement and then reviewing all the other criteria before calling them for an interview (Ray & Stallard, 1994).

Factor 3 accounted for an additional 15.72% of the variances explained and can be interpreted as "business skills." The items loaded in this factor include "extracurricular activities, written communication, financial skills, analytical skills, and oral communication skills." This factor is interpreted as business skills because the items represent overall business knowledge (including financial and analytical skills) coupled with communication and extracurricular activities. It is believed that extracurricular activities could develop one's skill in handling business matters. Although extracurricular activities have been rated as the least important skill for business graduates (Eberhardt & Moser, 1997), one cannot deny that such attributes are important in enhancing the individual's self-development, motivation,

and initiative. Business skill also refers to the soft skills and "hard" aspects required in managing organizations effectively.

Factor 4 accounted for an additional 15.45% of the variances explained and can be interpreted as "working skills." The items loaded in this factor are "previous work experience" and "teamwork skills." Working skills refer to those skills required by an employee to get the job done. As such, past work experience is believed to have an impact on recruiting potential employees (Eberhardt & Moser, 1997; Ray & Stallard, 1994). Ability to work in teams was also considered important, as Tanyel et al. (1999) found.

The factor analytic solution, therefore, identified key factors considered critical in hiring new MBA graduates. Our findings are consistent with previous findings that business graduates need certain types of skills more than others (Aiken et al., 1994; Down & Liedtka, 1994; Eberhardt and Moser, 1997; Kane, 1993; Mohd Nazari & Sharon Ann, 1996; Ray & Stallard, 1994; Tanyel et al., 1999). This result suggests that employers hiring MBAs are more concerned with certain skills



or attributes than others. However, our findings appear to differ from the previous studies in that the key factors that we identified were based on the loadings of the items considered necessary in hiring MBAs.

### Study Implications

Previous studies suggest that local MBAs are comparable to foreign graduates. In this study, we found that local MBAs were perceived to have inferior skills compared with foreign MBA graduates. Employers also indicated that they had more problems with local MBA graduates than with foreign ones. This situation is aggravated by the fact that local MBA graduates are deficient in communication skills and English language competency, compared with foreign MBAs. To resolve this issue, we must address both the program providers and the MBA students.

Program providers in Malaysia must find more creative and innovative ways to handle the communication problem, which is perceived as most critical by many employers in Malaysia and abroad. One of the reasons for Malaysian students' poor communication skills is their shyness. Students in Malaysian schools and tertiary institutions are obedient and passive and believe that they are demonstrating respect to the teacher by avoiding questions that could embarrass him or her. Local MBAs' poor communication skills also could be attributed to the "face saving" concept in Asian cultures. This type of attitude is prevalent among MBA students who have little or no work experience. We should note that there are institutions that accept MBA students with no work experience provided that they have good academic results. Program providers must address the issue of teaching adults to be more active and to communicate more openly in MBA classes. MBA teachers in Malaysia must be willing to accept the critical views of their students and introduce more experiential learning methods, case studies, and role-playing to encourage local MBA students to participate in their learning methods.

Because many of the local MBA students have little work experience and a passive attitude and are more oriented to

examinations, instructors must make changes in pedagogy at an incremental pace and introduce these teaching methods in the early phase of the MBA program. Program providers also need to change the structure of the course evaluation in terms of placing more emphasis on presentation, class participation, and report writing. These exercises will help students improve their oral and written communication skills.

To improve students' proficiency in the English language, program providers should promote it as the medium of instruction in the MBA programs and require its use for students' oral presentations and written reports. These requirements should be compulsory for students in the core courses and some elective courses. We should note that, although the major textbooks and references are in English in many graduate programs in Malaysia, students nevertheless may submit their written assignments in Malay. Thus, those students who are weak in English may opt to submit their assignments in Malay because it is easier. But if the students are compelled to write in English, they may improve their proficiency. This rule would not be difficult to implement today: Beginning this year, the Malaysian government is compelling teachers to teach mathematics and science subjects in English at the primary and secondary school levels. MBA students must be informed of their weaknesses and must take immediate steps to make their skills comparable to those of foreign graduates.

The results of this study also showed that certain key factors are critical in hiring MBA graduates. For MBA graduates to be employable, they have to meet employers' expectations for managerial, technical, business, and work skills. Before registering, potential MBA students should seek more information on the teaching methods and approaches used in the local universities so that they get the most value for their money. They should be aware of how their MBA experience will enhance their careers and professional development.

MBA program providers should review the existing MBA curriculum and assess its effectiveness in meeting employer expectations for graduates'

managerial, technical, business, and work skills. This review may require dialogue sessions with potential employers to determine areas that need to be strengthened in the current MBA curriculum. In the dialogue sessions, program providers should present to employers the current contents of their program and the processes involved in its delivery. Potential gaps could be reduced, and employers would become more aware of the processes involved in the local MBA programs. Local program providers also need to visit MBA program providers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia and exchange information on ways to improve the curriculum and the delivery system in Malaysia. Local program providers also may consider encouraging local MBA participants (particularly full-time students) to spend 1 semester in a foreign university. This exposure will enhance local MBAs' perspective on the business world and improve their self-development.

Finally, our findings in this study suggest that there are new factors or dimensions considered important by employers, bolstering our recommendation that program designers review local MBA programs for consistency with the current millennium's requirements. More innovative solutions need to be introduced to meet today's challenges and the needs and expectations of the various stakeholders in our continuously changing business environment.

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