

University Students' Communication and Employability Skills: Mismatch Perspectives of Students, Lecturers, and Employers in Sarawak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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In Malaysia, graduate unemployment is a problem that is often highlighted. Studies have shown that graduates lack soft skills, such as problem solving, English language proficiency, and communication skills, which contribute to the issue of unemployment. However, these studies have not investigated employability skills from all three perspectives of students, lecturers, and employers to understand whether students are developing the necessary skills to be more employable, and whether lecturers are getting it right when preparing their students for the job market. Therefore, this study fills in the gap by comparing university students' communication and employability skills from the perspectives of students, lecturers, and employers. The study aimed to determine students' ratings of communicative ability and employability skills, and how these ratings match those of the lecturers and employers, and to compare the ranking of the importance of these skills by lecturers and employers. The questionnaire data were collected from 123 students, 26 lecturers, and 26 employers in Sarawak, Malaysia. The findings showed that the students rated themselves more highly on reading and writing, and employability skills than on listening and speaking skills. The lecturers and employers ranked employability skills as more important than communication skills. They were consistent in the ranking of interpersonal skills and presentation skills as the top communication skills. The top employability skills were time management skills, leadership qualities, managing personnel, managing resources, teamwork spirit, planning, organising, controlling and evaluation skills, and problem-solving aptitude. However, lecturers prioritised teamwork spirit while employers prioritised problem-solving aptitude. However, none of the reading and writing skills were among the top 10 skills expected of graduates entering the workplace. In concluding the study, the overall findings indicated that the students and lecturers overrated the students' readiness for the workplace.

I. INTRODUCTION

As Malaysia heads towards the knowledge economy route, employability skills have become a core asset for employees, particularly among fresh graduates. The reason is because knowledge economy jobs require “independent, self-motivated workers” (p. 4) [1]. Employability is defined as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (p. 8) [2]. In Malaysia, employability skills are referred to as soft skills while in the United Kingdom, they are known as transferrable skills. In Australia, these skills are viewed as a subset of generic attributes, which students are expected to develop during their university years [3]. University education can only equip students with a certain set of knowledge and skills which students should be able to adapt and transfer to new situations. Employability skills are referred to as the “qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility ... [which are] needed for success in work and life as a whole” (pp. vii-viii) [4]. Adaptability and flexibility are particularly important in an era when conditions change quickly and unpredictably, referred to as a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) environment.

Employability skills refer to an ability to move sufficiency in the labour force via sustainable employment [5]. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) in the United States of America [6] categorises employability skills into four competency clusters as follows:

- (1) basic skills – reading, writing, listening, speaking, and arithmetic;
- (2) thinking skills – creativity, reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making, and learning skills;
- (3) personal qualities – positive attitudes such as responsibility, high self-esteem, sociable, integrity, honesty, and self-management skills; and
- (4) workplace competencies – resource management, interpersonal, and information skills.

All these skills usually involve the development of an employee's expertise, knowledge base, and mindset, which in turn allow them to stand out among the crowds and attract potential employers.

In Malaysia, graduate unemployment is a problem that is often highlighted in the mass media. The Education Ministry's 2018 Graduate Tracer Study reports that the 21 public-sector universities and 38 private-sector universities in Malaysia produced approximately 51,000 graduates annually[7]. However, 60% of those graduates remain unemployed a year after graduation. Nooriah and Zakiah state that many fresh graduates are unemployed due to lack of experiences, having poor communication skills, and pursued studied not relevant to the job market[8]. The industry perspective on crucial skills that are expected of employees can be seen from job advertisements. Bakar, Mohamed, and Hanafi analysed job advertisements and concluded that 61.9% of employers considered effective communication skill as a highly employable trait for those applying for executive and managerial positions, and 47.62% required them to have interpersonal and personality skills [9]. Bakar et al. also found that about 43% of employers needed their executive employees to have strong leadership qualities. Ooi and Ting subsumed interpersonal skills under communication skills, and posited that communication skills encompass language proficiency, communicative abilities, and interpersonal skills [10]. Their study showed that more employers specified communication skill as a requirement (54 advertisements) than communicative abilities (22 advertisements) and interpersonal skills (17 advertisements). Universities and colleges attempt to rectify the problem of graduate unemployment by teaching soft skills. Language proficiency skills, such as English and Malay, have long become compulsory subjects but the emphasis has increased. Currently, entrepreneurship and information technology courses are also compulsory courses for students to take to ensure they master these skills upon graduation. Despite the emphasis on soft skills, studies such as Hanapi and Nordin show that graduates lack certain soft skills such as problem solving and communication skills[11]. Lim et al.

report that hard skills such as technical knowledge and applying knowledge, and English communication skills remain a challenge for graduates to master [12]. All in all, there are many factors including communication, problem solving, and critical thinking that contribute to the unemployment issue in Malaysia [13,14].

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia (p. 12) stated that one main factor that contributed to the unemployment issue among graduates is due to “a mismatch in the supply and demand of graduates, with employers reporting that graduates lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes” [15]. Such mismatch is not only taking place in Malaysia but also across European countries such as France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Mourshed, Patel, and Suder reported of the poor interaction between education/training institutions and industry sector [16]. Thus far, studies in Malaysia [9, 10, 17, 18, 19, 20] have investigated employability skills from one perspective, either students, lecturers, or employers, but have not compared all three perspectives. Little is understood about whether students are developing the necessary skills to be more employable, and whether lecturers are getting it right when preparing their students for the job market. A comparison of the three perspectives will shed light on why Malaysian graduate employability is not as high as expected and enable institutions of higher learning to align their soft skill focus to the requirements of the job market.

To fill in the gap, this study therefore examined university students' communication and employability skills from the perspective of students, lecturers, and employers. There were three main objectives of the study: (1) to determine how well the students' self-ratings of communicative ability match those of the lecturers and employers; (2) to determine how well the students' self-ratings of employability skills match those of the lecturers and employers; and (3) to compare lecturers' and employers' ranking of most important skills that an effective employee must have.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study involved the use of questionnaires to collect data from 123 students, 26 lecturers from a public university, and 26 employers in Sarawak. For the students, 74.80% were female and 25.20% were male. Their English proficiency was weak to moderate, measured using the Malaysian University English Test (MUEIT) band scores (4.06% Band 1; 14.63% Band 2; 30.08% Band 3). Only 46.34% were considered academic users of English (Band 4, 41.46%; Band 5, 4.88%). There was a balance of gender for lecturers (12 female, 14 male) and employers who were either managers or human resource management with authority to recruit employees (11 female, 15 male). The number of employers in their companies ranged from 10 to 27,000. The average years of working experience for lecturers was 8.7 (range: 1-25) and employers was 5.6 (range: 1-15).

The questionnaire elicited information on demographic background (gender) and other relevant information such as Malaysian University English Test (MUEIT) band scores (for students) and years of working experiences (for lecturers and employers). MUEIT is an English language proficiency test used for Malaysian public university admission. Band 6 is the highest and gives an indication of the student having high English proficiency while Band 1 is the lowest and indicates the student being least proficient.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections, focusing on listening and speaking skills (6 items), reading, and writing skills (7 items), and employability skills (12 items). A five-point rating scale was employed: (1) not at all, (2) to some extent, (3) just enough, (4) to a reasonable extent, and (5) to a great extent. For the three sections on the skills, lecturers and employers were asked to rate the extent to which university students have achieved a particular skill upon graduating from university. In the last part of the questionnaire, the lecturers and employers were asked to select the top 10 skills out of the total of 25 skills. The data were keyed into an Excel spreadsheet and mean, and frequencies were computed. We acknowledge the limitation of this study in that internal consistency scores such as Cronbach Alpha values are not available.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results are reported in three sections of (1) listening and speaking skills, (2) reading and writing skills, and (3) employability skills. Some of these skills are basic such as understanding directions and instructions, but other skills are advanced such as running and chairing meetings and managing personnel and resources. Subsequently, the lecturers' and employers' ranking of most important skills are reported. This section ends with a discussion of the overall findings.

Listening and Speaking Skills

Table 1 shows the rating of students' listening and speaking skills at the point of graduating from the university given by students, lecturers, and employers. Overall, students rated themselves highly for their listening and speaking skills (average of 3.61). The lecturers' rating was almost similar to their students' rating as in the ratings were above the mid-point of three (average of 3.29). However, the employers' rating was relatively lower (average of 3.15), which indicates that employers' expectations of fresh graduates were high. Most employers expect graduates to be ready to tackle the workforce demands upon graduation, but the graduates did not seem to be equipped.

Table 1: Rating of students' listening and speaking skills by students, lecturers and employers.

Listening and speaking skills	Students' self-rating	Lecturers' rating	Employers' rating
1. Giving directions and instructions	3.68	3.58	3.65
2. Understanding directions and instructions	3.89	3.77	3.96
3. Running and chairing meetings	3.31	3.04	2.54
4. Interpersonal skills	3.62	3.28	3.19
5. Presentation skills	3.62	3.48	3.08
6. Interview skills	3.37	3.12	2.50
7. Phone etiquette	3.78	2.73	3.15
• Average	3.61	3.29	3.15

Note: (1) not at all, (2) to some extent, (3) just enough, (4) to a reasonable extent, and (5) to a great extent.

Students rated themselves highly in understanding directions and instructions (3.89), having phone etiquette (3.78), and giving directions and instructions (3.68). Such results are not surprising because from the first year at university, students are taught to understand instructions given by their lecturers regarding assignments, quizzes, and projects. Hence, they have repeatedly practised this skill. As for giving directions and instructions, when students have to complete group projects, they learn to communicate with one another. Some who lead the projects would have learnt the skill of giving instructions to their team members. On the other hand, among the listening and speaking skills, students rated themselves lowest in running and chairing meetings (3.31). Most students did not have much experience in this skill because only those appointed as leaders in the societies have the opportunity to pick up this skill.

Lecturers rated their students highly in understanding directions and instructions (3.77), giving directions and instructions (3.58), and possessing presentation skills (3.48). The lecturers' rating of the first two skills were similar to the students' rating. Lecturers often assessed their students' presentations as part of the coursework assessment, and they felt that the students were ready to handle presentations at their workplaces. There was one skill where lecturers gave very low ratings to the students (2.73) compared to students' self-ratings (3.78) and employers' ratings (3.15), and that is phone etiquette. Examples of situations where students have to make phone calls to sort out information are enquiring about accommodation, fees, and when they face difficulties in enrolling for a course. Thus, they were "taught" to speak politely and listen carefully to the other party. The lecturers found that the students could not introduce themselves and announce the purpose of the call properly when they made telephone calls to their lecturers, and they also spoke softly and unclearly. However, the students mostly felt that they had fared well in phone etiquette.

Employers thought highly of students' ability to understand directions and instructions (3.96), and were more satisfied than the students themselves (3.68) and the lecturers (3.58). For the rest of the skills, employers rated them lower than lecturers and

students themselves, and these are skills that students should work on to be work-ready. In particular, skills such as running and chairing meetings (2.54) and interview skills (2.50) were all rated below the mid-point of three. In the work market, such skills are regarded as highly desirable but the university students were found wanting. Running and chairing meeting is a module in the English for professional communication courses but knowing the contents of minutes is different from chairing a meeting. Students generally do not have adequate opportunities to run meetings as passive learning has been the base of most courses. Even if role plays are conducted in class, they do not simulate real-life professional contexts enough for the students to acquire the skill of chairing meetings.

Reading and Writing Skills

Table 2 shows the results of ratings of students' reading and writing skills by students, lecturers and employers. Overall, students rated themselves highly in all seven reading and writing skills listed (average of 3.75). In fact, lecturers rated their students' reading and writing skills highly as well (average of 3.49). The results revealed the workplace reality, that is, the students do not meet the employers' expectations with respect to their written communicative skills (average of 2.92).

Table 2: Rating of reading and writing skills by students, lecturers and employers.

Reading and writing skills	Students' self-rating	Lecturers' rating	Employers' rating
1. General office communication	3.75	4.42	3.15
2. Note taking	3.83	3.35	2.88
3. Letter writing	3.63	3.12	2.62
4. Report writing	3.72	3.35	2.69
5. Research skills	3.61	3.20	2.73
6. Library skills	3.57	3.04	2.54
7. Online searching skills	4.14	3.96	3.81
• Average	3.75	3.49	2.92

Note: (1) not at all, (2) to some extent, (3) just enough, (4) to a reasonable extent, and (5) to a great extent.

Among the reading and writing skills, both the students and lecturers felt that the students were the best at general office communication. In fact, this was the only skill where the lecturers' ratings (4.42) were higher than the students' ratings (3.75). They

probably felt that their students were very ready to handle customers in general after undergoing all types of training during university years. The lecturers' judgement was correct because employers also rated new university graduates as having good online searching skills (3.81) and acceptable general office communication skills (3.15). The employers rated all the other reading and writing skills below three.

Table 2 shows that among the reading and writing skills, students rated themselves the highest in online searching skills (4.14). The ratings of the lecturers and employers concur, shown by the mean score of 3.96 and 3.81 respectively. The university students frequently do online research for their assignments and projects, so they think they already have excellent skills. For online searching of information for their numerous assignments and thus, the lecturers felt that they have enough practice upon graduation.

The students also rated themselves highly in note-taking skill (3.83) and report writing skill (3.72). The lecturers were somewhat satisfied with the students' mastery of these two skills (3.35 for both skills). However, the employers felt that their note taking (2.88) and report writing (2.69) skills were not satisfactory. The students may think that they have good practice taking notes in all courses throughout their years of studies at university although they are given PowerPoint slides and other materials in the online learning platforms to download. For their courses, they also have to do report writing, so they may have assumed that they have mastered the skill. The students may not be fully aware that there are different expectations for language style, format, content, and targeted audience for professional communication. Reports submitted at universities would be theoretical and conceptual while reports at work would have precise and concise content to suit the wider range of audiences. The subject matter may be more technical, requiring the use of specialised vocabulary. In fact, the students overrated themselves on six out of the seven reading and writing skills listed in the questionnaire (with the exception of general office communication explained earlier). This indicates their overconfidence in themselves.

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Among the writing skills, from the lecturers' perspective, their students were the weakest in letter writing skills (3.12), compared to note taking and report writing skills. The employers' negative rating (2.62) on letter writing is not a good sign because English for professional communication is usually a compulsory course for Malaysian university students. Students are taught how to write memos and letters (enquiry, complaints, job application). They are also taught differences in the format of memos and letters, thereby equipping the students with skills for general office communication. Despite all these courses, it seems that the level of letter writing skill is still not satisfactory for a majority of graduates. They do not get sufficient opportunity to practise writing letters. They usually write informal emails when they are late in submitting assignments and request deadline extensions. Only some students write formal letters such as to appeal to change courses or to be allowed to sit for the final examination when they have missed too many lectures. Otherwise, for routine matters, students fill in forms. There are hardly any occasions that students would need to write letters for applications; hence, they would lack such skills.

Finally, for reading and writing skills, the results for the lowest ratings are described. The students rated themselves the lowest in library skills (3.57), and the employers (2.54) and lecturers (3.04) felt that this was their weakest reading and writing skill. With the availability of online materials, many students do not make full use of the library resources during their years of study in the university. Most of their research are done online. However, their research skills are not satisfactory from the employers' perspective (2.62). In the current era of technology and globalisation, research skills are essential because in a company, such skills would help employees to identify customers' problems, assist them in solving the issues, improve on their roles, develop new products, and keep up-to-date the latest approaches/trends in the market and adapt to them. Research skills also help in advancing fresh graduates' career because it indicates initiative in looking for information to solve problems and to acquire new skills and knowledge.

Employability Skills

Table 3 shows the results on students' employability skills as rated by students, lecturers and employers. Overall, students rated themselves highly in all 12 employability skills (average of 3.74), and the mean scores revealed their belief that they had all the necessary employability skills to get recruited for work when they graduate. The lecturers also felt that the students had a reasonable level of employability skills (average of 3.54) but the employers gave marginally negative ratings (average of 2.97). This shows that the students and lecturers may not be in touch with the expectations of employers.

Table 3: Rating of employability skills by students, lecturers and employers

Employability skills	Students' self-rating	Lecturers' rating	Employers' rating
1. Lifelong learning skills	3.90	3.50	2.73
2. Time management skills	3.77	3.31	2.92
3. Information Technology (IT) skills	3.73	3.92	3.54
4. Arithmetical and computational skills	3.51	3.54	3.42
5. Leadership qualities	3.51	3.42	2.50
6. Managing personnel	3.64	3.31	2.23
7. Managing resources	3.56	3.35	2.81
8. Teamwork spirit	4.11	4.04	3.42
9. Planning, organising, controlling and evaluation skills	3.85	3.38	2.88
10. Problem solving aptitude	3.73	3.42	2.85
11. Good academic record	3.76	3.69	3.46
12. Achieving professional goals	3.78	3.65	2.88
• Average	3.74	3.54	2.97

Note: (1) not at all, (2) to some extent, (3) just enough, (4) to a reasonable extent, and (5) to a great extent.

The employers felt that university graduates have good teamwork skills (4.11) and Information Technology (IT) skills (3.54). Among the employability skills, teamwork skill was rated by the highest by students (4.11) and lecturers (4.04). Due to the extensive practice in searching for information in group work assignments and projects during their university years, the students felt that they excelled in these skills. The lecturers have observed how their students work together as a team in their group assignments and projects, they probably felt that most of their students were ready to tackle the duties assigned at work as a team. Their assessment is correct, seen in the high ratings given by the employers.

Next, the employers and lecturers concurred on the students' good IT skills. Lecturers ranked their students' IT skills as the second highest (3.92) among the employability skills, and so did the employers (3.54). Students complete assignments using computers and online resources, and some assignments even require students to produce videos. During the university education, the students develop good IT skills. In the current digital era, computational skills are essential because most transactions are conducted online.

Employers felt that most of the university students had achieved good academic record (3.46), and arithmetic and computational skills (3.42). The lecturers (3.69) and students themselves (3.76) were also confident that their academic record was good enough for them to get employed. Employers prefer graduates with good academic achievement, as this indicates that they have intellectual capability and would be serious about performing their duties at work. As for arithmetic and computation skills, the students (3.51) and lecturers (3.54) felt that the students had a reasonable level of skills to solve practical business problems. Not all students excel in arithmetical and computational skills as they are from various disciplines and not wholly from the sciences. However, although employers place importance upon graduates' numeracy skills, Durrani and Tariq (2012) stated that the literature seems to be unclear about the extent to which numeracy skills influence graduates' employability, and it is also unclear which specific

numeracy skills the graduates are expected to have [21].

The employability skills that the students lack, from the employers' perspective, are lifelong learning skills, time management skills, leadership qualities, managing personnel and resources, planning, organising, controlling and evaluation skills, problem solving aptitude, and achieving professional goals. This is where the students and lecturers overrated the graduates' skills. In the university setting, students may not have the opportunity to learn some of these skills. For example, managing group members in group assignments is different from managing human and financial resources. When fresh graduates enter the workplace, they are at the lower rank of the management hierarchy. Some amount of upskilling and reskilling will have to take place during the employment.

Lecturers' and Employers' Ranking of Most Important Skills

Table 4 shows the lecturers' and employers' ranking of 10 most important skills. The lecturers and employers were consistent in selecting the following as the top 10 skills and the categories are as follows:

- (1) listening and speaking skills: interpersonal skills and presentation skills;
- (2) employability skills: time management skills, leadership qualities, managing personnel, managing resources, teamwork spirit, planning, organising, controlling and evaluation skills, and problem-solving aptitude.

Interestingly, reading and writing skills are not among the top 10 skills that university graduates are expected to have when they apply for jobs.

However, the lecturers and employers differed in their views on two skills. Lifelong learning skills was ranked as number six by employers, but lecturers did not consider this to be among the top 10 skills. This is an area for university educators to take note because when lecturers do not give priority to training students on this, the graduates may not have adequate ability to teach themselves new skills and knowledge to cope with the fast-changing work environment. On the contrary, IT skills was ranked as number six by lecturers, but employers considered this as less important than other skills. It is possible that

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employers assumed that IT is basic skills that present-day employees should have, and therefore it does not need to be highlighted.

Table 4: Lecturers' and employers' ranking of 10 most important skills

Category	Skills	No. of lecturers	Rank	No. of employers	Rank
Listening and speaking	Giving directions and instructions	5		3	
	Understanding directions and instructions	9		6	
	Running and chairing meetings	1		1	
	Interpersonal skills	16	5	17	3
	Presentation skills	14	8	11	10
	Interview skills	1		4	
	Phone etiquette	4		6	
Reading and writing	General office communication	7		9	
	Note taking	2		3	
	Letter writing	1		9	
	Report writing	5		9	
	Research skills	7		2	
	Library skills	1		1	
Employability	Online searching skills	0		1	
	Lifelong learning skills	7		15	6
	Time management skills	19	3	20	1
	IT skills	15	6	6	
	Arithmetical and computational skills	3		7	
	Leadership qualities	21	1	17	3
	Managing personnel	12	10	12	9
	Managing resources	13	9	15	6
	Teamwork spirit	21	1	16	5
	Planning, organising, controlling and evaluation skills	17	4	14	8
	Problem solving aptitude	15	6	20	1
	Good academic record	13		2	
	Achieving professional goals	9		7	

Note: If there is a tie in the rank like 1, then the next rank is 3 and not 2.

Next, the results on lecturers' ranking will be presented for the top three skills. Table 4 shows that the lecturers considered leadership qualities and teamwork spirit as the top skills, followed by time management skills. All three skills are in the employability skill category. Teamwork spirit is needed in the workplace because projects cannot

progress as standalone work. For example, in a hospital setting, a patient case is handled by a team of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, nutritionists, physiotherapists, and laboratory testers. Hence, teamwork from all parties is needed to ensure good patient care. In addition, to ensure all the teammates are performing their roles, good leadership qualities stand out as the most important employability skill, from the lecturers' perspective. When university graduates enter the workplace, they are at an entry-level position and are less likely to lead their colleagues in group projects. Having experienced many late submissions of assignments from students which delayed their marking and subsequent submission of marks reports, lecturers felt that time management is vital in ensuring all parties perform their roles within the timeframe given.

Next, employers ranked time management skills and problem-solving aptitude as the top skills, and leadership qualities and interpersonal skills as the second in importance. On time management and leadership skills, the ranking of the lecturers and employers concurred on the importance of these two skills. This shows that the university educators were on track in preparing their students for the workplace. In a company, time management is vital because if an employee or a team delays the work, it would affect the next stage and subsequently the entire production line. As a result, the product or service would be delayed when handling the clients, resulting in dissatisfied clients. In relation to ensuring that the product or service is completed on time, competent leadership would be needed in the team. Even though they are in entry level positions, university graduates are expected to have strong leadership qualities.

However, problem solving aptitude and interpersonal skills (which were ranked as top skills by employers) were not given as much priority by lecturers – and this is a matter of concern. Table 3 shows that students rated themselves as having good problem-solving aptitude (3.73) but employers were certainly not impressed (2.85, which is a negative rating). The lecturers' rating of the students' problem-solving aptitude (3.42) was not far from the students' self-ratings. In the event of work that do not go as planned, problem solving skills would be needed to

address the issue. Employees cannot keep referring to their supervisors to solve problems, and this is when lifelong learning skills come in useful. Despite the emphasis on soft skills in university, it seems that the employers felt that only a small proportion of students have problem-solving aptitude. Students do not have opportunities to interact with real clients during university years, although they may practise problem solving skills using role-play situations among their peers in the same class. This comparison of the three perspectives on problem-solving aptitude reveals the need for institutions of higher learning to prioritise developing students' aptitude to solve problems.

Next, surprisingly, employers placed a great deal of importance on interpersonal skills (ranked third) compared to lecturers who ranked it as number five. This is an area which university students felt that they had mastered (3.62) but lecturers (3.28) and employers (3.19) were not as impressed (Table 1). Having good interpersonal skills would definitely boost a student's application for work as it means that they can interact confidently and appropriately during the job interview. When they are working in the company, they can interact with their colleagues effectively and work well with them and show respect to them.

Discussion of Overall Findings

The overall findings showed that employability skills are ranked as more important for university graduates than communication skills, be it listening and speaking, or reading and writing. The lecturers and employees agree on the importance of leadership qualities and time management skills. However, lecturers prioritise teamwork spirit while employers prioritise problem-solving aptitude. These are employability skills that maximise employees' performances, minimise errors, and promote collaborations with colleagues to ensure effective and efficient functioning in the workplace. Another crucial finding is that students and lecturers overrated the graduates' skills, and the skill level actually fell short of the employers' expectations.

The study showed the importance of oral communication skills (listening and speaking), of which interpersonal skills is part of. It showed that

reading and writing skills are not as important from the perspective of lecturers and employers, compared to listening and speaking skills. These findings concur with other studies. Researchers who examined the employers' perspective by analysing job advertisements [9, 10] found that communication skill is ranked as the most important skill and interpersonal skills ranked second. For the lecturers in the present study, interpersonal skills, presentation skills, and understanding instruction and direction ranked high on their priority list. The employers also identified interpersonal skills and presentation skills as the most important listening and speaking skills. The match between the ranking of lecturers and employers on oral communication skills is a good sign because this shows there will not be misplaced priorities in preparing students for the workplace.

The findings showed that the students overrated their readiness for the workplace, indicated by the lower scores given by the employers when they were asked to rate the extent to which university graduates have achieved a particular skill upon graduation. The differences of the scores are the greatest for communication and employability skills. These results are similar to Nadarajah [20] who also found a mismatch between the skills that Malaysian graduates possess, and the skills needed by the job market. Nesaratnam et al. posits that the mismatch stem from the lack of bilateral communication between institutes of higher learning and the industries [22]. The students' overrated positive ratings of their skills can be attributed to the inclination of the younger generation who are self-confident [23, 24]. On the other hand, Ooi and Ting attributed the overly high self-ratings of students to their lack of working experience, or exposure to the working world [24]. For universities to produce graduates who are closer to meeting the expectations of employers, Bakar, Mohamed, and Hanafi [9] and Nadarajah [20] suggest frequent and strategic collaborations between the industries and the academic institutions. To narrow the gap in terms of graduates' skills and the needs of the job market, Raslie and Ting call for employers communicate their workplace expectations and needs explicitly as a way to reach out to Gen Y and Gen Z workers [24]. Through these efforts, the students' perceived readiness would be more realistic, and the

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employers' expectation of the students' abilities would be met.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study showed that students and lecturers overrated the students' readiness for the workplace, which indicated that graduates may not fulfil the employers' expectations, leading to unemployment after graduation. Therefore, it is recommended that students should have lifelong learning skills and problem-solving aptitude to cope with the unpredictable changes, not only stay employed but also contribute to the growth of the company. This is because in today's fast-changing global employment landscape, most industries and company management have shifted in the nature of their business. Further studies are needed to understand employers' expectations in regard to employees' progress in developing important employability skills so that university educators and employees will know which skills need further training and enhancement to stay competitive in the workforce.

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