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## Covid-19: Employer Demand from Quantity Surveyor's Graduates towards Employability Skills

Nor Atiqah Mustapa<sup>1</sup>, Rozana Mohamed Salleh<sup>2</sup>, Nur Athierah Ashman<sup>3</sup>, Mas Idayu Saidi<sup>4</sup> and Nor Shafiqah A. Rahim<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Department of Built Environment Studies and Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, 32610, Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia, <sup>4,5</sup>School of Human Resource Development and Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 Skudai, Johor, Malaysia.

Email: [noratiqah@uitm.edu.my](mailto:noratiqah@uitm.edu.my), [rozasalleh@uitm.edu.my](mailto:rozasalleh@uitm.edu.my), [2020982349@student.uitm.edu.my](mailto:2020982349@student.uitm.edu.my), [masidayu@utm.my](mailto:masidayu@utm.my), [nurshafiqahrahim@utm.my](mailto:nurshafiqahrahim@utm.my)

### Abstract

Employability skills are a set of skills that have been identified as a fundamental element for graduate to secure and maintain jobs. Due to COVID-19, many people have lost their jobs including experienced employees. Thus, it is predicted that future graduates would face difficulties in securing employment. This is because long before the pandemic of COVID-19 occurred, the issue of unemployment among graduates already existed. Now with the pandemic, the situation could get worse. Therefore, objective of this study was to examine quantity surveyor graduate employability skills that are demanded by quantity surveyor consultant firm in the pandemic COVID-19 situation. This research employed a quantitative approach. A set of questionnaires has been distributed to registered quantity surveyor consultant firms in Selangor. The findings revealed that most employers would prefer to have a candidate with soft skills more than hard skills. Graduates are required to have soft skills such as Being capable to adapt with changes, having a positive attitude, and being flexible. However, that does not mean that hard skill or technical skill is not important in quantity surveyor securing a job. It is just that it is less demanded as all graduates are expected to already have the skills. The findings are useful for improving quantity surveyor graduates' understanding of the employability skills perceived as being most important in seeking a job. For further research, it would be good to expand the study to include the contractor's perspective since this study only focuses on consultant firms. This is due to the fact that the role of quantity surveyors in consultant firms and contractors are different.

**Keywords:** Employability Skills, Covid-19, Quantity Surveyor, Graduates, Soft Skills

### Research Background

Most countries in the world have implemented mobility restrictions, travel bans, social distancing, and quarantines to keep pace with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, economic activity declines, causing a sharp decline in vacancies. According to Cortes and Forsythe

(2020), job listings fell 44% between February and April with weekly listings dropping from 815,000 in the week of March 15 to 460,000 in the week of April 26. Then a decrease in vacancies causes an increase in the unemployment rate. More than 40 percent of adults reported that they or someone in their family lost their job, or salary because of the virus (Acs and Karpman, 2020). Therefore, the unemployment opportunity in the post-COVID-19 generation is twice as high as in the pre-COVID-19 generation (Buheji and Buheji, 2020). The unemployment rate rose 1.2 percentage points to 4.5 percent in 2020, the highest in nearly three decades compared to the previous year (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021).

According to Abd Rahman et al (2020), even after a year is over, nearly 60 percent of Malaysian graduates are still unemployed, and the percentage is expected to increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened graduate employment. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of unemployment among academics had become an issue. This was supported by Tengku Kamarul Bahrim et al (2019), there are more than 250,000 graduates every year, but every fifth graduate is unemployed even after 6 months. Malaysian universities, public or private, produce many graduates every year, but ultimately the percentage of graduates who find employment is very low (Tengku Kamarul Bahrim et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation. This is because some companies are struggling to survive the downturn and are therefore struggling to pay their employees, leading to decreased vacancies and job losses. In these difficult times, finding a job is a challenge for graduates. Graduates can overcome these challenges through employability skills. All employers who require work skills must be possessed by all graduates to compete in the global market (Hendrawan and Daryanto, 2019). The exceptional employability skills graduates can offer during this pandemic can attract employers to hire them. In addition, graduates must measure themselves against people who already have several years of experience. Buheji and Buheji (2020) stated that the situation with COVID-19 requires graduates to prepare for a different era that requires a new paradigm and, above all, different competencies. Therefore, it is very important for graduates to improve their employability skills to get a job.

Quantity surveyor is one of the construction industry players in the construction industry. In Malaysia, the quantity surveyor profession is growing as construction work has increased in scale and complexity over the last century (Chong et al., 2012). The quantity surveyor profession has also been affected by the pandemic because the construction industry has also been affected by COVID-19 (Raoufi and Fayek, 2021). Without exception, the construction industry has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gamil and Alhagar, 2020). Thousands of quantity surveyor graduates are produced every year, and even before the COVID-19 pandemic the problem of unemployment existed. Then the pandemic had made things worse.

The main reason behind this severe unemployment among fresh graduates is a lack of job skills (Hossain et al., 2018). Experienced quantity surveyor expects not only basic academic skills from today's graduates, but also job-relevant skills. A study by Archer and Davison (2008) shows that employers value communication skills. Hamid et al (2014) also share the same finding that communication skills are important for employees. Meanwhile, Chai (2017) found that management skills ranked first as important job skills that quantity surveyor graduates must possess. The job skills required for quantity surveyor graduates may differ from the

situation before COVID 19. As reported by Waizenegger et al (2020), due to COVID-19, organizations are being caught off guard and unprepared for drastic changes shifting focus to digital transformation. Therefore, ICT and technology skills are one of the most needed job skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this research is very important to examine the employer's demand for the employability skills of quantity surveyor graduates in the COVID-19 context to attract the attention of future quantity surveyor graduates and to inform education providers. Research by Uddin (2021) recommends that graduates develop their job skills according to the requirements of employers. Otherwise, graduates may not be able to find and keep jobs. With this background, the results of this research can help quantity surveyor graduates to improve and sharpen their work skills to get a job.

### **Literature Review**

Job opportunities are often defined as a person's (perceived) ability to get and keep a job throughout his career (Buheji and Buheji, 2020). McCowan (2015) defines a person's employability as a set of accomplishments – skills, understanding, and personal qualities – as a result, graduates are more likely to find work and be successful in their chosen field, benefiting the workforce, themselves, the economy, and the community. Meanwhile, Obi et al (2020) relates job skills as the skills and knowledge that prospective workers must possess to ensure they can work diligently in the world of work, while using technical or subject-specific skills for the benefit of themselves, their employers and the economy in general. In the 21st century, employers are looking for candidates who have good job skills, not just good academic credentials (Rahmat et al., 2018). Job skills can be divided into two areas: hard skills and soft skills, where hard skills refer to technical knowledge while soft skills refer to personal and people abilities. Obi et al (2020) states that these hard skills are learned and can be improved over time, but soft skills can be difficult to acquire and change, so hard skills and soft skills determine graduate competence and suitability for jobs graduates.

### **Hard Skills for Quantity Surveyor Graduates**

Quantity surveyor profession is related to quantification ability (Karunasena et al., 2017). In general, the main task of quantity surveyor is to make cost estimates during the planning stage. In addition, quantity surveyor also advises clients on the cost implications of client requirements or other stakeholder decisions. In case of additional work and deviations, initial estimates and contract commitments will be monitored and updated as construction progresses (Olanrewaju and Anahve, 2015). Quantity surveyor then also acts as contract management; manage contracts between clients and contractors. The contract management process starts from the initial stage to the final stage to ensure that project progress is in accordance with the contract related to time extensions, payments, appraisals, repayment claims, government procurement, and others. In addition, contract administration includes management and dispute resolution, which will determine the procedures to be followed in the event of a conflict.

Financial control and project reporting are also one of the main tasks of the quantitative inspector. However, consultant's quantity surveyor and contractor's quantity surveyor have different project financial control practices. In terms of consultant's quantity surveyor, must have strong skills to analyse and implement projects when making recommendations for payments to contractors, as well as advising clients on the financial aspects of change (Badu and Amoah, 2004). Basically, the hard skills for a quantity surveyor are quantification and

costing of construction project, contracting practices, public procurement and tendering, project financial control and reporting, contract management, and knowledge of ICT and hard-skilled technologies. Another hard skill that a quantity surveyor must possess is risk management because risk management is one of the responsibilities of the quantity surveyor profession (Yogeshwaran et al., 2018). On the other hand, contractor's quantity surveyor controls costs during the construction phase based on actual costs and budgets, manages schedules, and prepares project reports (Badu and Amoah, 2004). However, this study focuses only on consultant's quantity surveyor, i.e., QS's hard skills in consultant firm.

To be successful in today's complex, dynamic, interconnected, and global world, graduates need not only a strong hard skill base, but also additional soft skills (Rahmat et al., 2018). According to Saad and Majid (2014), there is ample empirical evidence that employers are more likely to hire graduates who have both hard and soft skills. Obi et al. (2020) also emphasizes that the main drivers of employment for graduates in the construction industry from the perspective of employers are hard skills and soft skills. Therefore, it is important for quantity surveyor graduates to have soft skills in addition to hard skills.

### **Soft Skills for Quantity Surveyor Graduates**

In Malaysia, the general consensus of Malaysian employers recognizes that Malaysian graduates do not have soft skills even though they are well educated in their fields (Khalid et al., 2014). Private sector stakeholders also report that Malaysian graduates lack of language and communication skills (Ting et al., 2017). Employers often look for graduates with communication skills in the labor market (Khalid et al., 2014). Suarta et al (2017) has the same view point, the ability to communicate is one of the qualities of work skills needed by graduates to successfully enter the job market. Good communications are needed to avoid and resolve conflicts, able to convey and receive information clearly and able to read the audience (Ting et al., 2017).

Next, the ability to work in a team is as important as the ability to communicate. Teamwork involves working in a group of people with a common goal, and therefore without the ability to work in a team, it is difficult to achieve goals. According to Suarta et al (2017) Teamwork involves building relationships and working together with others, using several important skills and habits, such as making decisions and respecting different opinions in a healthy way. This explains why employers want to hire people with team skills. The ability to work in a team is critical to success in the workplace. Rahmat et al (2018) stated that employers need graduates who can work well with group members and nurture employees who demonstrate the ability to work well in groups and teams.

During the COVID-19 pandemic where employers have to reduce their workforce, workers with good decision-making and problem-solving skills will be able to secure their jobs because they have good job skills. Not only that, to be able to compete in these difficult times, 21st century job seekers must be able to find logical solutions to problems and must also be able to find effective solutions (Suarta et al., 2017). This shows that decision making and problem solving are among the most important skills employers look for when hiring. This was stated by Khalid et al (2014) which states that graduates are expected to be proactive and able to solve problems creatively. This suggests that graduates with decision-making and problem-solving skills are more likely to be hired and remain employed. Another soft skill that requires graduates to have a positive attitude. A positive attitude such as being proactive and willing will be the attitude that is highly awaited by every applicant to show readiness to face

the new normal (Buheji and Buheji, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, positive thinking and attitude can be of great help in difficult and challenging times and in dealing with the challenges of work in turbulent times.

Then, in the 21st century, employers are no longer just looking at good academic skills. They prefer employees who can adapt to any situation (Rahmat et al., 2018). Especially in situations of sudden environmental change like COVID-19, where the work environment is constantly changing and uncertainty. These soft skills enable graduates to easily acquire current and new knowledge, enabling them to make changes according to industry needs (Saad and Majid, 2014). In addition, flexibility in the quantity surveyor profession is an important soft skill, especially flexibility in terms of time. Employers may ask quantity surveyor to work overtime during peak hours, such as tendering of the new project (Chai, 2017). For this reason, universities need to focus on increasing student flexibility to enable future graduates to find and retain jobs in industry (Mohapatra and Mishra, 2017).

The last soft skill that graduates must possess is self-management (Kornelakis and Petrakaki, 2020). Self-management skills refer to the steps, strategies, and skills that people use to achieve goals (Gomez, 2017). Gomez (2017) adds that self-management skills are a good assessment of one's work ability. According to Aliksieieva et al (2021) self-management encourages the willingness for self-development through an individual's initiative. Self-management has become an important soft skill as it encourages graduates with psych pedagogical tools to develop their notorious entrepreneurial competencies (Yershova, 2019). In addition, Gomez (2017) found that graduates who have self-management skills can be easily trained.

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses a quantitative approach by distributing questionnaires. The target group of this research is an organization that is a quantity surveyor consultant in Selangor. Regarding the sampling method, a simple random sampling method has been chosen. This method gives each member of the population an equal opportunity to be selected. Selangor was chosen as the research area because it has the largest number of registered consultants registered with Board of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia (BQSM). There are a total of 151 quantity surveyor consultant firms registered in Selangor. From the selected target population, a sample will be derived by referring to Krejcie and Morgan table (Morgan, K., 1970). The total targeted population for this study would be 151 as it is expressed as (N) from the selected QS consultant firms. Then, the sample size (n) of 108 was selected according to Krejcie and Morgan table. Thus, 108 QS Consultant firms were invited to participate in this study.

The questionnaires comprise of 14 questions that focus on the quantity surveyor graduate's employability skills that are demanded by quantity surveyor consultant firm in the pandemic COVID-19 situation. The skills being assessed were both hard skills (ICT and technology knowledge, contract management, contract practice, public procurement and tendering, construction cost quantification and calculation, project control and reporting, risk management) and soft skills are assessed: flexibility, good communication, teamwork, decision making and problem solving, positive attitude, adaptability to rapid change, self-management). Respondents' responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was developed through a pilot study involving several employers to provide important and useful feedback on the elements of the questionnaire in terms of clarity and adequacy. Cronbach's alpha above 0.70

is considered acceptable, and the closer the Cronbach's alpha is to 1.0, the higher the reliability of internal consistency (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011; Hair, Page and Brunsveld, 2019). As for the pilot study of this study, the result of Cronbach's alpha assessment is 0.845 thus accepted as reliable as per suggested. Then the researcher continued with the actual data collection. A total of 108 questionnaires were distributed to quantity surveyor consultants in Selangor and the findings are discussed in the next section.

### Analysis and Discussion

About 100 consulting firm quantity surveyors answered the questionnaire. Table 1 shows the finding, quantity surveyor's employability skills that are demanded by quantity surveyor's consultant firm amid pandemic COVID-19. The findings were ranked in descending order from the employability skills with the highest mean score to the employability skills with the lowest mean score. Capable to adapt with changes has the highest mean score of 4.89. This finding is in accordance with Rahmat et al (2018), employers prefer to have prospective graduates who can adapt to fast-paced changes in the industry, rather than just strong academic credentials. Followed by a positive attitude, 4.87. Positive skills and attitudes are two important soft skills, especially in situations of sudden environmental change such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Buheji and Buheji (2020), positive attitudes such as proactiveness and preparedness would be highly expected attitudes of any contender to show the readiness for the new normal. Then, the third highest average score is 4.86 which is flexible. This may be due to the quantity surveyor profession itself, especially time, because according to Chai (2017), quantity surveyor in consultants sometimes have to work overtime at busy times, such as when bidding on a new employer for a project. In general, it can be said that the proportion of employers for soft skills is higher than for hard skills.

**Table 1**

Employability skills demanded by quantity surveyor consultant firm amid pandemic Covid-19

Employability Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation
Capable to adapt with changes	4.89	0.314
Positive attitudes	4.87	0.338
Flexible	4.86	0.349
Teamwork skills	4.84	0.395
Decision making and problem solving	4.83	0.378
Good communication skills	4.80	0.426
Quantification and costing of construction project	4.71	0.456
Contract practice	4.65	0.479
Procurement and tendering	4.65	0.479
Project financial control and reporting	4.64	0.482
ICT and technologies knowledge	4.60	0.667
Contract Administration	4.59	0.494
Risk management	4.55	0.609
Self- management	4.50	0.798

Interestingly, based on the results, the results show a low average score for hard skills. It can be said that soft skills like ability to adapt to change, positive attitude, ability to work in a team, good communication skills etc are more needed than hard skills like contract management, contract practice, public procurement and tendering, risk management etc. That is, quantity surveyor consultants prefer graduates who have soft skills. However, this does not mean that hard skills are not essential for job security. It just that it is less demanded as all quantity surveyor graduates are expected to already have the hard skills. Based on Mustapha (1999); Azmi et al (2018) employers in industry said that graduates in Malaysia have sufficient hard skills but lack of soft skills. For this reason, employers today pay more attention to soft skills than hard skills. In short, graduates who excel in soft skills have an advantage over other graduates. Therefore, quantity surveyor graduates need to know job skills to prepare themselves. It is therefore interesting to note that this study provides an interesting opportunity to assess and understand the demand for quantity surveyor consultants for graduate employability.

### Conclusion

The focus of this research is to clarify the job skills needed by quantity surveyor consultants in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that quantity surveyor graduates must have soft skills in addition to hard skills to secure and maintain jobs. Learning from the COVID-19 situation, hard or technical skills solely will not work. Therefore, quantity surveyor graduates need to upgrade their skills in terms of soft skills. Graduates with excellent hard skills without soft skills no longer make sense, as employers are looking for employees who have good soft skills especially in the COVID-19 situation. In addition, graduates who are being capable to adapt with changes, having a positive attitude, and being flexible are in high demand by employers. It is crucial for the quantity surveyor graduates to have a good soft skill along together with their hard skills so that they could secure and maintain jobs.

This research is limited to consultant firm of quantity surveyor. It is therefore good to expand the study to include the contractor's perspective as a recommendation for future investigations. This is because role of quantity surveyors in consultant companies and contractors are slightly different. Therefore, the employability skills sought by contractor company may not be the same as quantity surveyor firm. In addition, further research is recommended to examine strategies for improving the soft skills of quantity surveyor graduates. In addition, it will be interesting to observe the employability's skills required by other professions in the construction industry towards graduate. In conclusion, it is interesting to note that this study provides an interesting opportunity to assess and understand the demand for quantity surveyor consultants' firms for graduate employability.

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