

# Unveiling the Expectations of Digital Economy Practitioners towards Graduate Employability from an Islamic Higher Education Institute in Brunei Darussalam

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## Abstract

The future of work is projecting a skills shift for the future workforce. Various global actors and stakeholders within the digital economy are preparing for this shift to accommodate new advances in technologies such as generative AI, IoT, robotics and autonomous systems. Higher education actors are no exception. Research shows that practitioners now have higher expectations towards graduate employability in terms of future-ready skills. This research aims to uncover the expectations of practitioners from the digital economy sector in Brunei Darussalam towards the employability skills of graduates specialized in Islamic knowledge. A purposive sample was selected based on the practitioners that received interns from At-Tamayuz, an internship programme offered under an Islamic Higher Education institute in Brunei Darussalam. The findings have shown new insights from practitioners on their perspectives and expectations towards graduates in Islamic field of knowledge. A total of 11 skills were recommended by practitioners for these graduates that will facilitate their employability for future of work with an added spiritual component under Spiritual Capital. These new findings represent a new set of customized skills for graduates within the discipline of Islamic higher education.

**Keywords:** Digital Economy Practitioners, Graduate Employability, Islamic Higher Education Institute, Brunei Darussalam

## Introduction

This paper examines contemporary research on future of work and graduate employability based on current trends in global literature. The relationship between these two themes will narrow down to the gap in the literature: the expectations of practitioners towards graduate employability in Brunei Darussalam. Brunei is rapidly progressing its digital economy sector with a strategic target focused for 2025 onwards (MTIC, 2019). This paper delves into the insights of a selected sample of practitioners within this sector to discuss in detail the skills

required for future of work. The paper will also focus on graduates specialized in Islamic knowledge as there are a lack of studies that focus on these graduates.

## **Literature Review**

### *Future of Work*

Future of work refers to the work which is projected to change according to the fourth Industrial Revolution which is an on-going and consistently dynamic process of changing work needs and skills. Businesses and economy will experience exponential change as technology, innovation, and shifting workforce expectations reshape the meaning of work and how it gets done (Shaw, S; 2017).

In the global context such as America, they are already facing the loss of middle-wage jobs despite new occupations and overall job growth. Research analysis suggests that by 2030, these jobs could decline as a share of national employment by 3.4 percentage points. It further shows employment in low-wage jobs declining by 0.4 percentage point, while employment in the highest-wage jobs grows by 3.8 percentage points. The growth of high-wage opportunities can be realized only if workers can obtain the necessary education and skills. Forging career pathways to help people move up and finding sources of future middle-wage jobs will be essential to sustaining the US middle class society (McKinsey Quarterly, 2019). More than 1 billion jobs, almost one-third of all jobs worldwide, are likely to be transformed by technology in the next decade, according to OECD estimates. By just 2022, the World Economic Forum estimates 133 million new jobs in major economies will be created to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Zahidi, 2020). It has also been reported that the future of work will see 35 to 50% of the current jobs will be replaced over the next 15 years. Young people will face perhaps 3 to 5 career changes during their working life and education must prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist.

Research conducted by McKinsey Quarterly (2019) reported people's perception on the impact of IR 4.0 upon four key factors namely prosperity, individual well-being, sustainability, fairness and trust. Lowest perception was reported in areas of job security, trust in society and reduction in inequalities. In terms of job security, people perceive higher risk of unemployment, job stability and quality. In terms of trust, people perceive a lack of trust in actors in society, privacy and institutional capital. These findings further show that there is a need to develop an Islamic-based curriculum in development management which takes into account the needs of the job market of IR4.0 in line with the morals and values outlined in the principles of Islamic-based management. In addition to this, findings to a recent study showed that management skills also play a pivotal role towards marketability and employability of graduates for future jobs.

### *Graduate Employability*

A report on graduate employability show that a lot of graduates are not employed, nor are they continuing further studies or undergoing any vocational training (ILO, 2020; Schwab & Zahidi, 2023a). Recent studies show that graduate employability is dependent upon variables such as human capital, social capital, individual behavior and individual (Clarke, 2017). While most recent studies have identified several dimensions of focus for the concept of employability which lie within career management, capital components, and contextual components (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). Within the context of Brunei Darussalam,

unemployment is relatively high compared with neighbouring states with a figure of 3000 graduates registered under job centre searching for jobs in 2020 (CSPS, 2020). The root cause of the issue was found to stem from a mismatch in their skills with the demands of the job market (CSPS, 2020). Therefore, this study addresses the issue of mismatch by exploring skills required for future of work in Brunei Darussalam. In the context of Brunei, the most recent study was conducted on the perceptions of employers within Brunei Darussalam towards Islamic graduates. the study looked at employers perception based on several aspects of their performance namely: the graduates personal attributes, competencies, skills, knowledge of ICT, ethics and personality (Asmad et al., 2021). The highest score was in terms of their ethics and personality as well as their personal attributes such as their discipline, integrity and commitment towards the job. However, an average score was attributed towards the student's management and leadership skills as well as their abilities to make decisions. This research investigated the current state of how employers perceive Islamic graduates 'employability skills. Subsequently, this paper explores the desired state of what employers expect of Islamic graduates' employability skills. As such, this paper aims to fulfill the following research questions: (1) What are the employability skills required for future of work in the global context? (2) What are the expected employability skills for future of work for Islamic graduates in Brunei Darussalam? (3) How can these graduate employability skills be included within Islamic higher education internship programmes<sup>1</sup>?

### **Method**

The first research question was answered using basic literature review methods with reference to white paper and reports of global organizations . For the second research question, basic qualitative methods was used to explore the expectations of practitioners towards graduate employability skills within an Islamic higher education institute. The sample of practitioners comprise of 10 informants from government and private sector. The sample method used purposive sampling based on the participation of practitioners in receiving graduates as interns within their organization. The data was later verified with a sample of three academicians from the higher education institute. The qualitative data was coded with deductive codes (based on response from informants) and inductive codes (based on interpretation by researcher). Content Analysis was then conducted using Atlas-ti to derive frequency of skills being mentioned throughout the interview. Finally an overall comparison on the skills was conducted to form a framework for graduate employability skills for future of work in a higher education internship programme.

### **Results**

Employability Skills within the global context was explored referring to and compared in the following Figure:

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<sup>1</sup> This study was conducted on At-Tamayyuz internship programme offered by an Islamic university in Brunei Darussalam. The programme offers undergraduates internship opportunities within their third year of enrollment in public and private organization within the nation (Azahari & Ahmad, 2022).



Figure 1: Comparison of Global Organization Reports on Skills

Source: Adapted from (Coursera, 2020; Schwab & Zahidi, 2023b; UNESCO, 2023; United Nations, 2021; Wiley, 2021)

Figure 1 show that global organizations refer to skills as a set of competencies sometimes referred to as values or mindsets and attitudes. These skills span across several specialized areas within the industry such as business, technology, data science. The skills remain varied albeit somewhat similar to each other, yet change dynamically according to context.

The findings of the qualitative study further show the following skills were found to be among the expectations of graduate employability skills for future of work for graduates discipline in Islamic knowledge in Brunei Darussalam. Existing studies have identified three capital components that support the concept of employability which comprise of human capital, social capital, and psychological capital (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). This study has identified an additional capital component in line with the theory of Islamic-based development within an Islamic contextual framework. These capital components can be viewed in Figure 1.

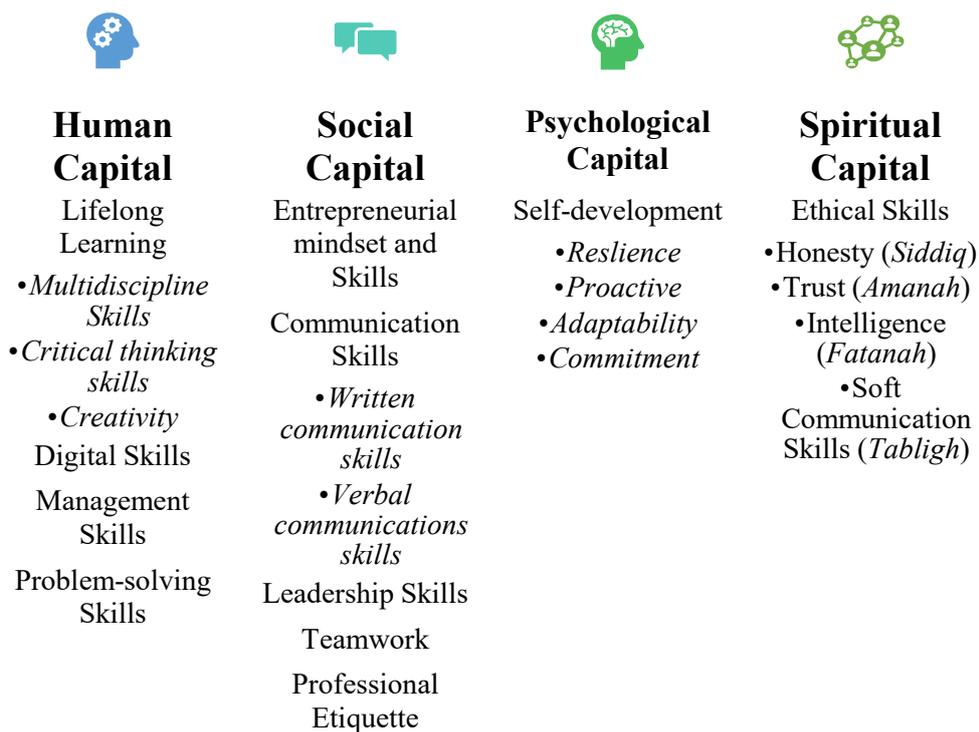


Figure 2 Graduate Employability Skills for Future of Work in Brunei Darussalam

## Discussion

The following discussion will highlight the findings portrayed in Figure 2 based on the different skills that were discussed with the informants. It will highlight what are the expectations of practitioners and employers towards graduates in Islamic related field of knowledge in terms of employability skills. A total of 11 skills will be discussed including the sub-skills as part of the 11 core skills for graduate employability in Figure 2.

### *Lifelong Learning Skills*

The results for lifelong learning skills are linked with critical thinking, creativity, and multidisciplinary skills. According to the findings of informants 5, 8, 9, and 10, multidisciplinary skills are defined as an individual's ability to continuously learn new knowledge that transcends the scope of his or her discipline while maximizing the potential of his or her existing knowledge through the application of critical thinking and creativity. Informant 9 has emphasized the importance of this skill in situations where there may be a lack of resources, such as time and manpower, to train new graduates in specific areas. A graduate disciplined in Islamic Finance, for example, can easily acquire technical or digital skills by simply googling or learning the skills through YouTube tutorials.

### *Communication Skills*

Communication skills were ranked first in this study, with all informants agreeing that it is by far the most important skill. According to the findings, this skill has been linked to a variety of other skills including professional etiquettes, confidence, problem solving skills, teamwork, leadership, and soft skills. Written communication, verbal (non-written) communication, and soft skills are all subsets of this skill. Regardless of the mode of communication, both are critical for graduate employability and the future of work. Informants 4 and 13 emphasize the

importance of being able to effectively track, discuss, and brainstorm ideas through both physical and online communication. According to informant 12, the majority of people have an imbalance in their verbal and written communication: "If they can't communicate verbally, they can't communicate in writing." Another informant emphasize this skill:

*"...communication. For example, if the intern doesn't talk much stays quiet, especially at the law firms. So sometimes these interns, they have to be trained how they deal with people. Sometimes they're quiet when they do their work. Their work is very good when it comes to talking or dealing with people. And they find it hard. That's the problem, actually".*

### *Digital Skills*

The second highest rated ability among respondents is data handling, followed by keeping up with current business practices. Keeping up with the times is the most crucial component of the future of employment. For example, the following quote from Informant 8 demonstrates the importance this skill:

*"...using raised beds or conventional beds for their growth or for the growing of vegetables and stuff. So we are actually encouraging them to go for more more for technological advances such as using of fertigation hydroponic systems and planting, growing crops in greenhouses those kinds of changes that we are actually encouraging. So it also although it may be from departmental from so from our department or organization, methods that we need to adapt these technologies as well in order to teach our farmers to actually change their perception and methods. method of cultivation as well.*

*To become more efficient and cost-effective, almost all organizations—public and private—are moving toward digitization or digitalization. Cost-effectiveness in this situation entails increasing technical expert hiring while decreasing the requirement for outsourcing (Informant 4 and 13). For instance, Informant 10 uses a psychometric system to assess key performance; Informant 5 trains new hires on how to use big data for research; and Informant 9 uses and implements a digital leave management system. The religious community is skillfully making an effort to modernize its traditional dakwah practices.*

### *Management Skills*

Strategic planning and digital and technological abilities were two themes under managerial skills to which this talent was related. Strategic planning has been connected to managerial skills by informants 4, 5, and 12. Informant 12 adds that without adequate preparation, you will be doing something pointlessly, whereas Informant 4 encourages the younger generation to take greater initiative and participate more actively in the process of strategic planning for the future of work. The importance of this talent in project management (Borg et al., 2020), service management (Moyo & zgit, 2022), time management (Caingcoy et al., 2021; Nadarajah, 2021), and people management has also been highlighted in existing literature (Adegbite & Adeosun, 2021). The literature indicates that this talent is crucial for employability. However, graduates are hardly ever involved within the process of strategic management due to lack of experience.

### *Problem Solving Skills*

Problem-solving abilities have been linked to critical thinking abilities. Several authors in various contexts have branded problem solving skills as an employability skill (Bhatnagar, 2021; Fajaryati et al., 2020; Halili et al., 2022; Nadarajah, 2021; Oraison et al., 2019; Ruhanen et al., 2021; Sokhanvar et al., 2021). According to the findings, problem solving skills are the ability to use critical thinking in theoretical knowledge and apply this knowledge to solve real-life problems (Informant 5, 6 and 11).. Informant 5, for example, has linked the use of problem-solving skills to conducting research as well as assessing and evaluating one's own strengths and weaknesses. According to informant 5, “...yes, it's very important actually, even we know so much, but how you apply it to the real world, that's what we want...It's like someone who learnt Economics in university, but comes the real-life problem, they will say – we didn't learn this back in school...”

### *Professional Etiquette*

Professional etiquette refers to a person's good character and behavior in the workplace that demonstrates professionalism based on the response of Informant 11. Informants have responded in a similar pattern to the graduates' Islamic culture, specifically their dress code, competency in performing Islamic rituals, manners, social interactions, and overall discipline. All of these factors influence their professional etiquette. Informants 2 and 5, for example, emphasize the importance of following dress code rules and regulations. Informants 4 and 7 praised the ability of Islamic graduates to lead prayer recitals during meetings and public events, Tahlil events, and other religious social gatherings that are mandatory in Brunei Darussalam. However, due to a scarcity of males, this role remain underrepresented within the government and other industry sectors.

### *Leadership*

Leadership is a crucial employability skill that creates a sense of global connectedness and allows individuals to manage teams effectively. It sets an example by learning and developing followers, encapsulates problem-solving, decision-making, and interpersonal skills, and is sought after by employers. Emotional intelligence is a sub-skill of leadership, as it requires positive emotion control and possessing relevant characteristics such as good interpersonal skills, self-confidence, empathy, and discipline. This study combines these two skills, highlighting the interconnectedness of teamwork and leadership. Islamic graduates are seen as vicegerents, enhancing their role towards their creator, mankind, and the environment. They must be able to understand their followers and familiarize themselves with people from different backgrounds. The findings suggest the need to include leadership as part of the internship assessment program to inculcate this role early on, rather than waiting for graduates to gain employment before they can realize their role in an actual sense.

### *Entrepreneurial Mindset and Skill*

Through entrepreneurship, people can establish their own jobs using their own resources as a substitute for traditional employment opportunities. The study emphasizes the value of entrepreneurial skills in the young generation, especially among digital natives who have unique qualities that should be developed in line with that. The development of graduates' employability skills within the educational system involves relevant stakeholders. When discussing potential future career paths, Informant 4 promotes candor and open-mindedness. Informant 11 draws attention to the difficulties in finding employment for graduates in

Malaysia, where the government fully promotes entrepreneurship initiatives. Findings further emphasize the importance of including entrepreneurial skills in higher education programs in light of the shifting socioeconomic and generational features.

#### *Teamwork*

The fourth and last top-rated talent is teamwork. It was commonly related to communication ability in informant answers, as was already mentioned. Informant 2 also noted that one organization's basic values included "teamwork." Teamwork has been associated with networking and collaboration, albeit with a little variation. Creating roles and standards for a group of people to adhere to in order to work as a team and contribute to the group's overall success (Steira & Steinmo, 2021). The ability of team members to establish the foundation for collaboration based on each person's psychological ownership and mutual understanding is referred to as collaboration (Steira & Steinmo, 2021). The ability to contribute to a team in order to accomplish a goal is how the researcher defines collaboration. according to Informant 9.

#### *Self-Development Skills*

*One of the psychological capital-classified employability abilities has been recognized as self-development. This talent focuses on how people can develop themselves to become more employable. Significant sub-components of this talent have been identified as resilience, proactiveness, dedication, and adaptability. In terms of significance and importance for the future of work and graduate employability, adaptability obtains the highest score. For example, Informant 11 elaborates this as follows:*

*"...how they can make themselves suitable with a new corporate culture. Because most of the people whenever they enter a new organization, they do not study the culture of the new organization. So, this is very important because when we want to work with another organization compared to the previous organization, there must be a lot of difference in terms of people in terms of environment. So in the management we call these like, environment and culture of the organization. So we also interview like, normally will identify how do you make yourself immersed with the new environment in any organization culture, because if you bring it if they bring this previous culture to the new culture, it might be not suitable. So it should be the new people that want to work with new organization they study and make themselves suitable with a new environment and any organization culture"*

*Therefore, it is essential that graduates employ the proper self-development techniques and strategies in order to be flexible within themselves. According to one definition, adaptability is a collection of psychosocial processes that help people manage and get ready for the transition from school to employment (Atitsogbe et al., 2019).*

#### *Ethical Skills*

Ethical skills are essential for a Muslim's success in the workplace, as they involve adhering to the Islamic code of ethics. These ethics consist of four characteristics: intelligence (*Fatanah*), honesty (*Siddiq*), trust (*Amanah*), and communication (*Tabligh*). Honesty is crucial for distinguishing a believer from a hypocrite, and it is practiced in speech and actions (Mahmud et al., 2018). Trust is another attribute often associated with honesty, and it is related to the fulfillment of responsibilities towards work, others, and the environment. Trust is also

associated with justice and equity, and a Muslim should fulfill trusts justly and equitably. Intelligence, also known as *Fatanah*, is essential for understanding and applying Islamic religious knowledge. It is considered an act of worship and is prioritized in Islam. Intelligence helps individuals make wise judgments, avoid risks, and achieve optimal growth and performance in their work (Rahman & Shah, 2015; Salin et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence is also essential, as graduates must adapt emotionally to different work environments and apply their Islamic religious knowledge to their work tasks. *Tabligh*, the main soft skill, is the responsibility of a vicegerent to disseminate and deliver Islamic religious knowledge through calling others towards Islam (*Dakwah*), enjoining good (*Amr Maaruf*), and forbidding others from evil (*Nahi Mungkar*) (Briandana et al., 2020). This skill is emphasized by most informants to encourage Islamic graduates to share and implement their Islamic knowledge more voluntarily and proactively within different work environments. Moreover, it is a vital skill to address ethical issues that may arise under the scope of socio-cultural artificial intelligence (Feher & Katona, 2021). For example, some of the following quotes have highlighted these attributes to be part and parcel of this skill:

Honesty highlighted by Informant 6:

*First thing first, if you do the work, you know, you test your mistake you have to own it okay. So the same thing when you carry out the work, okay? If you did the wrk, you will be the one they ask...it's important that you stand your ground because this is where your quality and your ethic comes in..."*

Trust highlighted by Informant 5:

*Trust: sometimes, there are some people that you need to have trust on them. Meaning if you don't trust (them) you can (not) give a job to (them). I can give a job to you to but I give you a deadline ask let say I give you a week deadline to but within a week or two you never got back to me so my assumptions is that you understand what you should be doing but you never even come up with that job leading me to question that there must be something wrong with you.... "*

Intelligence highlighted by Informant 2

*"In Faculty of Sharia, the students (should) know how to apply the rules and regulations of Sharia. Because that is their area of expertise. That's their discipline. So if they were to work anywhere, whether it be in a shop, they can still apply that skill of applying the legal skill of ascertaining which one is when we when we increase the price of a particular commodity, what is the rules? Is it halal? Is it haram? Based on their knowledge, ensuring they can inform their supervisor that this is actually forbidden in Islam. So, whatever is forbidden can actually apply. Or they can refer to the Sharia courts in this matter ..."*

Soft communication skills highlighted by Informant 11

*"There are a few villages that our student already go inside and make program two days three days or four days and sometimes five days program even they went as far as Sabah and Sarawak. So this is why we say they are capable to become a daie (preacher) they are capable to become manager, they are capable to become I mean, finance officer because at the same time, they already know how to place themselves nicely with the society and can communicate well with the society".*

**Recommendation**

The employability skills discussed in this paper represent the latest findings on the expectations of employers towards graduates disciplined in Islamic studies. Previous studies have discussed on the future of work and how it may affect the future prospects of employment through digitalization, job displacements, new job creations, disruptive innovations (contributing to productivity and efficiency) (Azahari et al., 2023). This study has explored the expectation of employers and industry stakeholders towards interns disciplined within Islamic education. The novelty in findings show that ethical skills play an important contribution towards employability for future of work. These ethical skills have been further categorized under Spiritual Capital as one additional capital component that should be considered for employability (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). Spiritual capital has previously been explored within literature but has not been considered as a construct towards employability. Future research is encouraged in several areas:

- Defining the concept of employability from Islamic perspective
- Exploring evidence within Islamic history and divine sources (Quran and Hadith) on the importance of spiritual capital
- Testing the theory of spiritual capital quantitatively among graduates, interns or other target groups on their understanding of the concept, and its practice
- Testing the practice and understanding of ethical skills as defined in this study among graduates, interns or other target groups on their understanding and practice of ethical skills
- Exploring further why ethical skills may be an important skill for the future of work under the topic of socio-cultural Artificial Intelligence from Islamic perspectives

**Conclusion**

Overall, the employability skills in the global context comprise of a combination of skills, competencies, mindset and values which are similar to the qualitative findings in Brunei Darussalam. In the context of Brunei, the main skills comprise of communications skills, lifelong learning, digital skills, management skills, entrepreneurial skills, problem solving, professional etiquette and teamwork. The main difference lies within self-development skills and ethical skills. These skills are also underpinned by Islamic-based principles. As such, in the quest for future-ready skills, there is a likelihood that certain skills may overlap based on certain contingencies. However, within the context of Brunei, the main distinction lies in the Islamic political and socio-economic background. Based on these findings, Figure 1 show a framework of graduate employability skills which can be used and codified within the Islamic higher education internship programmes to prepare graduates for future of work. The incorporation of this framework is essential as human resource recruitment is predicted to become more and more competitive in response to the changes projected for future of work.

The study has contributed towards the existing theoretical body of knowledge which has affirmed that the four characteristics of the prophets in Islam can be used as a form of code of ethics which can be used within the workplace to regulate the affairs of workers in tandem with Islamic teachings and principles (Mahmud et al., 2018; Salin et al., 2020). More studies have shown the significance of the concept of spiritual capital within various contexts such as disaster mitigation (Badi'ah et al., 2022;) and connected it with 'Islamic-based competencies' (Husna et al., 2021). However, previous studies have not yet conceptualized the concept of spiritual capital as a contextual component of graduate employability. This

study has added this component and included the four characteristics of the prophets as constructs to measure the ethical skills of graduates in Islamic field of knowledge. As such, its contribution towards Islamic contexts such as Higher Education, Islamic countries and Muslim graduates in non-Islamic states can be seen in the findings in Figure 2. This framework can serve as an ethical guideline aligned with Islamic principles for these graduates for the future of work.

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