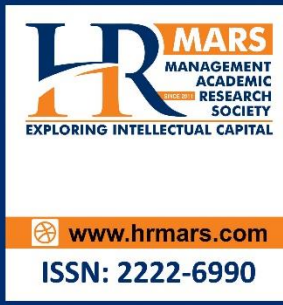




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Obstacles to Employability Skills Training Programs in Malaysia from the Perspectives of Employers', Educators' and Graduates' Perspective

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, employability skills training programs initiated by the Malaysian government and agencies are an essential strategy to improve the skills of the workforce and minimize unemployment. However, stakeholders seem perplexed about the direction and attainment of the training programs. There are raising concerns whether employability skills training programs are designed and offered properly in improving workers' skills and securing unemployed workers' employment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of educators, employers, and recent graduates regarding the contributing factors that impede the progress of employability skills training programs. The theoretical framework for this quantitative study was based on Human Capital Theory. A survey questionnaire contains qualitative component questions was developed to gather feedback from employers, educators, and graduates from the central economic region of the west coast of peninsular Malaysia. The findings of this study revealed the major obstacles to effective employability skills training programs in the workforce of Malaysia, such as unclear objectives and direction of training programs, negative attitudes of recent graduates, and inactive involvement of employers in local workforce education and training. These obstacles will be a key area to be assessed and improved in program evaluation.

Keywords: Employability Skills, Training Programs, Workforce, Unemployment, Obstacle

INTRODUCTION

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016), the majority of unemployed Malaysian labourers are between 20 and 29 years old, including graduates from postsecondary and tertiary learning institutions. One of the unemployment problems among recent graduates is a lack of employability skills. Research has indicated that industrial employers report that students lack employability skills, such as people management skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, professionalism, knowledge and principles, problem-solving skills, and decision-making

skills (The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012; Tong, 2003). Due to a lack of employability skills among graduates, many recent graduates feel it is very difficult to find a job, especially in the globally competitive market and the fast-changing working environment of today. A lack of these skills makes it difficult for them to fulfill the current work demands and professional expectations (Bakar & Hanafi, 2007; Mai, Simkin, & Cartledge, 2010; Martin, Maytham, Case, & Fraser, 2005; Shah, 2008). Studies by Mohammad, Nor, Omar, and Mohammed (2004) and Salleh, Othman, Esa, Sulaiman, and Othman (2007) have also supported that recent graduates are having difficulties in securing employment within six months after graduation from higher education institutions and training centres.

Due to a lack of employability skills among graduates, the Malaysian government has initiated comprehensive employability skills training programs to improve skills and retrain the existing workforce, with the goal of minimizing unemployment. Such an agenda has been a priority in national economic plans, the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, and the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 (The Economic Planning Unit, 2010; The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012). Through the national economic plans, the government has initiated diverse employability skills training programs. One of them is the Industrial Skills Enhancement Program (INSEP). The objectives of the INSEP are to: (a) reduce the gap between unemployed recent graduates and the skills required by the job market; (b) increase the confidence level among unemployed recent graduates in communication, especially in English; (c) improve participants' personality in the aspects of disciplines, time management, creativity, and innovation; and (d) enhance graduates' knowledge and skills according to the market needs (Baba, Misdi, & Kaprawi, 2010). Funded by the federal government, this is a collaborative training program between the government and Malaysian industries that involves local and international expertise.

The Graduate Employability Management Scheme (GEMS) is another training programs initiated by the national economic plans. The GEMS is aimed to enhance the employability of recent graduates who are still searching for jobs. The objectives of the program include: (a) facilitate job-matching between recent graduates and employers; (b) equip participants with the most commercially relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes for targeted job positions; and (c) help in the assimilation and integration of recent graduates into the workplace. Additionally, the Recognition of Prior Learning program (RPL), aims to enhance the career prospects of the workforce by conferring the Malaysian Skills Certificate on workers who have no formal certification, but who have obtained relevant knowledge, experience, and skills in the workplace (The Economic Planning Unit, 2010).

The government also initiates multiple training programs to strengthen the employability skills of graduates to help them in obtaining a job, such as Graduate Entrepreneurship Scheme, Graduate Entrepreneurship Loan, 1Malaysia Training Scheme, Technology Specialist in Specific Domain Expertise, Train and Place Scheme, and Apprentice Graduate Program (Department of Labour Peninsular Malaysia, 2013; Perbadanan Usahawan Nasional Berhad, 2013; Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad, 2013; The National Institute of Entrepreneurship, 2011). The graduates' training programs are unique because they target different groups of job seekers and develop specific skills. Simultaneously, the government encourages and intensifies the involvement of the private sector to establish accredited in-house training programs and extend these programs beyond their employees. The benefits of in-house training programs are that the private sector produces qualified, skilled

workers who are prepared to fulfill their increasing demands and are not only employable in their work settings, but across similar industries (The Economic Planning Unit, 2013).

Employability skills training programs are an essential strategy to improve and retrain the workforce of Malaysia. The programs assist to minimize unemployment by equipping recent graduates with up-to-date industrial skills in the workplace. However, the lack of assessment and evaluation studies concerning employability skills training programs in Malaysia presents a problem. This scenario raises a concern about whether employability skills training programs are effective in preparing recent graduates to acquire the necessary skills demanded by industries and to secure jobs later. Therefore, there is a critical need to continuously assess and evaluate the role of employability skills training programs in the workforce of Malaysia.

Malaysia is confronted with an unemployment issue among university graduates. By initiating employability skills training programs, the government has attempted to strengthen graduates' skills so they are able to secure professional positions. However, there is a lack of assessment and evaluation studies with respect to local employability skills training programs for helping unemployed university graduates. The accountability, capability, and efficacy of training programs have not been fully investigated. To date, there is a limited number of studies regarding employability skills training programs in Malaysia such as training program effectiveness, perceptions of stakeholders regarding training programs, standards and quality of training programs, and methods used in training programs (Mohd Hazwan Mohd Puad, 2015). Additionally, there is a concern regarding the progress and impact of employability skills training programs to improve the skills of the workforce and minimize unemployment. The need for research in this area is imperative not only for contributing to the field of knowledge, but also developing human resources and the workforce of Malaysia (Orner, 2009).

Existing local research and studies are focused mainly on the identification of the components of employability skills rather than assessment and evaluation studies on local employability skills training programs. For example, Zaharim, Yusoff, Omar, and Basri (2009) have conducted research in the development of the Malaysian Engineering Employability Skills (MEES) framework in 2009 and it is still in progress. They proposed a framework that can be utilized to develop employability skills, especially among engineering students, before entering the workforce. Other researchers, such as Bakar and Hanafi (2007) and Omar, Bakar, and Mat Rashid (2012), conducted a study on employability skills elements of technical and vocational students in the Malaysian technical training institutes. The studies assessed the level of employability skills of students, the acquisition of employability skills, and the differences in employability skills level by gender and students' majors. Other studies, conducted by Yusof et al., (2004) and Othman, Sulaiman, Masrom, and Buntat (2009), assessed employability skills components, such as problem-solving and decision-making skills. Yusof et al., (2004) assessed the problem-based learning method as a viable option of instructional method for engineering students. Such research has revealed the importance of employability skills and its components to assist recent graduates secure employment. However, they did not conduct empirical studies with respect to employability skills training programs. There is a gap of studies that address employability skills training programs to prepare recent graduates with essential knowledge and skills before entering the job market and securing a job.

In the world of work, policy makers, educators, parents, employers, and recent graduates seem perplexed about the direction for employability skills training programs. They are concerned about the effectiveness of employability skills training programs in producing high skilled workers who are equipped with the most commercially relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes for targeted job positions. Further, they are concerned about the challenges graduates face in the global job market if training programs did not fulfill their objectives and expectations to improve the skills of the workforce and minimize unemployment. There is a critical need, therefore, to investigate the perceptions of educators, employers, and recent graduates regarding the obstacles of employability skills training programs in the workforce of Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employability Skills Training Programs

In response to rapid changes in technology and the economy, programs and strategies have been initiated to increase knowledge and skills of the workforce. One of the strategies is an employability skills training program, a crucial plan to develop a knowledgeable and highly skilled workforce. Training programs are also initiated to minimize unemployment in, improve the skills of, and retrain the existing workforce. The role of employability skills training programs is vast. One of the roles is the professional advancement of the labour force. Hedges (2011) disclosed that employability skills training programs are an integral part of professional advancement and development. By enrolling in such training programs, employees and recent graduates can acquire knowledge and skills that are related to their professions, job responsibilities, and work environment. As a result, they can be qualified for career advancement and promotion. Further, employers acquire better prepared workers through continuous employability skills training programs (Dawe, 2004; Johnson, 2014). Additionally, employees are developed in terms of their aptitudes, disciplines, and performance-management skills. Consequently, these workers can adapt to challenges and difficulties in the workplace. Employability skills training programs also play a crucial role in developing professionalism of the workforce (Dawe, 2004; Hedges, 2011; Johnson, 2014).

The role of employability skills training programs continues as a medium for knowledge and skills transfer in the workforce (Laker & Powell, 2012). By implementing training programs, knowledge and skills can be shared between employers or industrial experts and employees. Knowledge and skills related to the workplace are varied and wide-ranging, such as technical information, safety and health guidelines, quality specifications, and market demands. Successful transfer of job-related knowledge and skills leads to the development of the competency of workers; therefore, it develops their knowledge in a high-skilled workforce (Leong, 2011). Johnson (2014) and Mustapha and Rahmat (2013) claimed that the transfer of knowledge and skills including, but not limited to organization, management, and operation, prepares employees to be competitive in the challenging job market.

Although Laker and Powell (2012) claimed that training programs are less significant to transfer skills in comparison to technical knowledge, Robinson (2000) contended that employability skills are teachable. The transfer of employability skills through training programs improves an employee's basic skills. The transfer can be more effective if training programs resemble a real

workplace environment. Skills and knowledge gained from training programs can be implemented directly to work settings.

Dawe (2004) and Dutton (2012) discussed the role of employability skills training programs as a preparation or an introduction for recent graduates and employees to work in industry. Employability skills training programs serve as a platform to expose trainees or new graduates to challenging careers in growing and emerging industries. Experience and knowledge gained from training programs assist recent graduates and employees to face the challenges and demands of the workplace. They can use their experiences and knowledge as a reference point before solving problems and making decisions.

The role of employability skills training programs is to address employees' and recent graduates' weaknesses and limitations. Employee weaknesses hinder them from giving the best services to their companies. Therefore, employability skills training programs play an important role in assisting workers in eliminating these weaknesses. By enrolling in training programs, employees have opportunities to strengthen their skills, especially in areas in which they need the most improvement (Social Research Center, 2014). Employability skills training programs also assist other employees in gaining similar skills and knowledge. Instead of only benefitting the individual employee, training programs also address the weaknesses of employee groups and bring them together to a higher and uniform level of performance.

Another purpose of employability skills training programs is to enhance organizational productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2014; Bhatti & Kaur, 2010). Through training programs, employees and recent graduates acquire new knowledge and skills related to job tasks in the workplace. The acquisition of additional knowledge and skills, such as communication, teamwork, lifelong learning, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, elevates the ability of employees and recent graduates to (a) work across job functions, (b) apply knowledge and skills, (c) think critically, and (d) act logically. They will understand more about their job demands and procedures, responsibilities, and opportunities for advancement (Johnson, 2014). Hence, they can perform jobs at a faster rate and adapt to change in today's global economy. Consequently, workers enhance their overall performance. Johnson also emphasized the importance of employability skills training programs regarding the increase of job satisfaction among employees; training programs in the workplace can also increase the loyalty of employees. Engaged and motivated employees are more likely to remain in their jobs and be loyal to their employers. Moreover, training programs raise worker satisfaction with their roles in organizations. As a result, the company realizes improvements in production, service, and output.

Training programs function to expand employment opportunities and increase competitiveness for job-seeking individuals, especially recent graduates (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2014). Some recent graduates are uncertain in regards to what they should do in the transition stage between school and work. They may be lacking knowledge and skills to obtain a professional position in the challenging market. Employability skills training programs offer necessary information, knowledge, and skills including how to secure employment. With improved knowledge and skills from training programs, they can increase their employment opportunities and competitiveness in the job market.

Curran (2010) and Jabeen (2011) viewed an in-house training program as a vital strategy for employers to increase motivation among their employees. After working for a long period, employees may seek external support, protection, or guidance to stimulate their motivation to work. Employers can utilize training programs to increase the level of motivation among workers. At the same time, employees may develop a friendly relationship among themselves through training programs, which can influence their overall efficiency and performance. The ABC Life Literacy Canada (2014) claimed that employability skills training programs can lead to fewer injuries and health risks. Employees gain more understanding of safety regulations and standard procedures in operating tools, machines, and instruments in the workplace. This promotes the culture of occupational safety and health as well as mitigates injuries and health risks among workers. The decreased number of injuries and accidents reduces insurance costs and employee downtime as well.

Skills development has been viewed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as an essential element in improving the quality of life and reducing poverty. Skills training, such as employability skills training programs, enable the working poor and vulnerable groups in the workforce, including minorities, rural communities, and special needs populations to escape from the vicious circle of inadequate education and training (International Labour Organization, 2014). People in these groups who face difficulties in accessing quality job training can benefit from employability skills training programs by obtaining better employment. Consequently, this secures their earnings and lowers the likelihood of unemployment and poverty.

The Role of Human Capital Theory in Employability Skills Training Programs

The introduction of human capital and economic development dates back to 1954 when William Arthur Lewis posited the impact of the neo-classical model of labour supply affiliated with the socio-economic productivity of a nation (Lewis, 1954). He proposed the imperative of grooming the local unskilled workforce seriously so they can obtain a higher standard of living and benefit from increased efficiency and improved wages. Mincer (1958) extended the concept of human capital by asserting the theoretical model of income distributions among individual differences. Mincer recommended that training should constitute higher annual pay for labourers and retirement benefits. His perspective heightened awareness about the importance of workforce education and training.

Schultz (1961) contributed significantly to the knowledge base of research in human capital development by critically explaining Human Capital Theory. He viewed knowledge and skills as vital elements in developing human resources. Through education and training, people acquire useful knowledge and skills as a form of capital. Schultz also believed that schooling expands the range of job opportunities available in the workforce, enhances wages, improves social and economic progress, and increases productivity. Education elevates the quality of consumption of workers throughout their careers. Schultz highlighted the notion that education and training are investments that yield returns in the development of the workforce.

Consequently, Mincer (1962) and Bowman (1969) shared human capital as a form of investment in education or training. They believed that education and training activities contribute to economic growth, improve the quality of the workforce, and raise private and social returns. Outputs from investments can yield private or general returns. Private returns benefit an individual,

such as additional earnings, higher skills, and higher academic degrees. Additionally, general returns benefit society, such as productivity, income tax collections, health awareness, and trust within communities. Equally, Blaug (1976) suggested that people take advantage of all available resources, including formal schooling and on-the-job-training. Both resources increase individuals' knowledge and skills. Improved knowledge and skills related to jobs enhance earning potential and future commercial and non-commercial returns. Blaug contended that education provides students with the necessary general education and specific training for transferring knowledge and skills to the workplace.

Almendarez (2011), Mustapha (1999), and Xiao (2002) reaffirmed the crucial factor of education and training in imparting knowledge and skills for private and social benefits. According to their research, individuals who acquire knowledge and skills enhance their abilities to deal with disequilibria in changing economic conditions. Knowledgeable and skilled workers improve their abilities to expand opportunities for salary increments during their careers. At the same time, education is important for transferring knowledge and skills to the workforce. Investments in education and training increase potential employment among job seekers, allowing people to benefit from pecuniary and non-pecuniary returns, and giving workers opportunities for job mobility across industries and nations (Nafukho, Hairston, & Brooks, 2004; Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008).

Furthermore, Fitzsimons (1999) and Schiliro (2010) reformulated the concept of investment in education and training. He claimed that education and training in the workforce is a key strategy to survive in the new global economy. In the global economic environment, the economic market is fuelled directly by a knowledgeable and skilled workforce (Schiliro, 2010). This type of workforce drives research activities within a nation. Research activities lead to product invention and the discovery of new technologies, therefore, developing a country's economy. A knowledgeable and skilled workforce contributes to the growth of employment opportunities. Employers prefer to hire trained labourers for their organizations rather than insufficiently skilled new graduates. Employers have to expand more resources to retrain employees to support their knowledge and skills (Juhdi et al., 2010).

Despite the benefits of Human Capital Theory, there are several arguments in dispute concerning the concept. Schultz (1961) expressed his concern with respect to the assessment of investments and benefits for human resources. It is difficult to measure expenses and returns exactly due to both quantitative and qualitative dimensions in human resources. For example, social factors are vast and it is difficult to quantify them. Furthermore, Schultz recommended five major categories that should be included in the theory: (a) health facilities and services, (b) on-the-job training, (c) formally organized education at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels, (d) study programs, and (e) migration of individuals and families. These factors are germane to overcome obstacles in measurement and improve human capabilities. However, it is complex to accurately measure these factors exactly because their definitions and interpretations are subjective. Other scholars, such as Blaug (1976), Jamil (2004), Mincer (1962), Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008), Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2004), and Tan (2014) shared similar concerns, too. The problem in quantifying human resource factors has become a barrier and discrepancy for Human Capital Theory.

Researchers and economists have been able to demonstrate a direct statistical relationship between investment in education and training with earnings; however, they have not been able to

show a cause and effect relationship (Bianco, 2014; Jamil, 2004). There is no apparent study reporting that investment in education and training is a causative factor for higher earnings and productivity. There are also explained and unexplained non-educational factors that influence career earnings. One of the factors is individual ability. Highly-educated individuals are likely to possess personal ability, competency, self-discipline, and motivation to succeed and gain higher salaries. Therefore, high income and career success are not solely because of education gained; they are also influenced by personal attributes.

Another critique of Human Capital Theory is the screening hypothesis or scepticism of higher education. Accordingly, theoretically, higher education serves to grade and label students in the workforce. In reality, a higher level of education and training does not necessarily ensure individuals to become more productive in their careers and lives. The education they gain may yield credentials that are associated with higher-paying jobs. They may secure professional positions associated with high salaries because of degrees and reputations from particular schools and institutions. Therefore, the reason they succeed is not solely because of investment in education and training; it may be due to academic degrees and credentials.

Although there have been discrepancies surrounding Human Capital Theory, there is no doubt the returns of education and training to individuals, firms, and economies are important. Individuals spend some portion of their income on education in return for increased future earnings. Employers fund training of workers with the expectation of gaining returns in productivity, creativity, innovation, competitiveness, and more profit for the business. By using a similar standard economic model, the benefits of education and training influence the gains in the economy as a whole.

The general concept of Human Capital Theory is that additional investment yields additional output. Education and training are assets of investment, while outputs result in economic gains for individuals, businesses, society, and nations. The process of education and training is able to assist the workforce in securing employment and compete in the global market. Education and training are pivotal investments in developing human resources and generating economic growth. The theoretical framework for this study was based on Human Capital Theory. As a developing country, it is increasingly important for Malaysia to focus on human resource development by strengthening a skilled labour pool for the nation. A sufficient number of highly skilled workers are required to enhance the country's productivity and growth. Skills and knowledge provide a competitive edge in a knowledge-based economy and increase global competition from human resource-rich countries. A model of Human Capital Theory is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

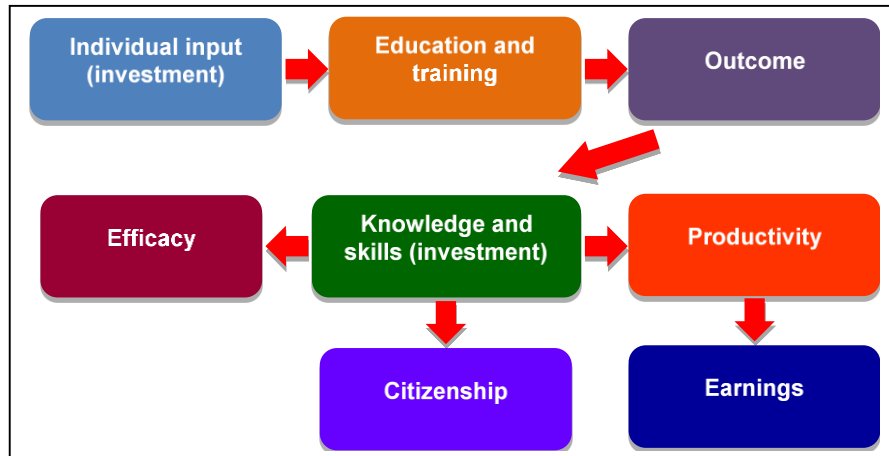


Fig 1: Model of Human Capital Theory

METHODOLOGY

This is a mixed method study which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative method of study. A survey, Employability Skills Training Program Survey, was used with a sample drawn from a population of educators, employers, and recent graduates. The survey consists of two parts: Part A and Part B. In Part A, questionnaire contains qualitative component questions that collected the perceptions of educators, employers, and recent graduates regarding obstacles to impede employability skills training programs in Malaysia. Participants were asked to rank-order and list obstacles to employability skills training programs in Malaysia. Part B consist of quantitative items, such as descriptive and demographic information. Participants were requested to fill up their demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity, highest level of education, and program major. The questionnaire were adapted with permission from Yusoff et al. (2012), developed from the review of literature regarding Human Capital Theory, and from the researcher's knowledge and experiences with respect to education, training, and the workforce in Malaysia.

There were three population groups for this study. All the population groups were from the central economic region of the west coast of peninsular Malaysia. The region was selected because the region is the most developed area in the country. The first population was engineering, technical, and vocational educators in public higher education institutions. The directory of educators was obtained from the website of higher education institutions. 272 educators were selected randomly and composed the sample for this study. The second population consisted of employers in the manufacturing sector. The employers were in firms, companies, and organizations in the manufacturing sector registered under the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA). This employer category was chosen based on the assumption that most university graduates who majored in engineering, technical, and vocational education programs were working in the manufacturing sector. Management personnel, such as supervisors, human resource managers, directors, and heads of departments represented employer perspectives. The list of manufacturing employers was obtained from the MIDA. A total of 186 employers were selected randomly and composed the sample for this study. The third population included recent graduates who were

enrolled in employability skills training programs. The researcher limited this study to employability skills training programs that were offered in higher education institutions and training centres in the research location. Only three programs were involved in this study: (a) Industrial Skills Enhancement Program (INSEP), (b) Workers Technical Transformation Program (WTTP), and (c) Graduate Enhancement Skills Programme (GEMS). All 284 recent graduates were selected and included in the sample because it was difficult and impractical to select subjects randomly from this population.

Prior to collecting data, permission was requested to conduct research on human subjects from the Research Promotion and Co-ordination Committee, Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia. A consultant or enumerator was hired to distribute the Employability Skills Training Program Survey to the sample of 272 educators, 186 employers, and 284 recent graduates. The consultant contacted the prospective respondents using both Malay and English languages. Face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, and e-mail messages were conducted in Malay and English languages during data collection. The use of telephone calls and e-mails accelerated the process designed to yield a high response rate. The consultant distributed the surveys by hand to the sample and collected the completed surveys on the same day. The consultant reminded the respondents by sending e-mails and making telephone contacts. These reminders were sent at least one week before the consultant collected data.

The first part the survey were analysed qualitatively to gather an in-depth understanding of the subjects' regarding the obstacles to employability skills training programs. Written feedback from respondents in the part A was coded into different categories by the researcher. There was no limit in the number and type of categories to ensure there were no missing critical themes. The initial categories were detailed and later cross-matched. Categories that had similarities were concluded to derive final themes for interpretation, analysis, and discussion. Then, the themes were frequency-counted and rank-ordered. The highest frequency theme ranked first, followed by second-highest, third-highest, fourth-highest, and so forth. In Part B of the survey, percentages for each of the demographic information variables were reported including gender, age, ethnicity, academic achievement, program major, total years of teaching experience, present position, and total years of management experience. Company size, type of ownership, year of graduation, duration of internship, current training program, and total years of work experience were also reported. The data were displayed by using tables that describe the characteristics of the sample groups.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the demographic information regarding the engineering, technical, and vocational educators who participated in this study. 64.8% of educators were male and 35.2% were female. In terms of participants' ages, 33.7% were 50 years of age or older, 34.8% were 40 to 49 years old, 28.1% were 30 to 39 years old, and 2.2% were 29 years or younger. The majority of the respondents were Malay (81.8%), followed by Chinese (11.1%), and Indian (7.1%). The participants were 64.0% doctoral degree, 24.0% master's degree, and 12.0% bachelor's degree holders. With respect to program major, 45.6% of the educators majored in Electrical/ Electronic Engineering, 22.4% Civil Engineering, 20.0% Mechanical Engineering, and 10.4% Chemical Engineering. Almost 85.4% of educators who participated in this study had not been involved in any employability skills training programs in Malaysia.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of educators

Demographic Variable	Educator (n=129)		Employer (n=85)		Graduate (n=203)	
	Respondent	Percentage	Respondent	Percentage	Respondent	Percentage
Gender:						
Male	81	64.8 %	56	70.0 %	139	69.5 %
Female	44	35.2 %	24	30.0 %	61	30.5 %
Age:						
50 years old or more	30	33.7 %	5	6.3 %	-	-
40 – 49 years old	31	34.8 %	38	47.4 %	-	-
30 – 39 years old	25	28.1 %	28	35.0 %	-	-
29 years old or less	2	2.2 %	9	11.3 %	-	-
25 – 28 years old	-	-	-	-	22	11.0 %
20 – 24 years old	-	-	-	-	143	71.5 %
19 years old or less	-	-	-	-	35	17.5 %
Race/ Ethnicity:						
Malay	103	81.8 %	39	52.7 %	162	80.6 %
Chinese	14	11.1 %	27	36.5 %	13	6.5 %
Indian	9	7.1 %	8	10.8 %	26	12.9 %
Highest Level of Education:						
SPM/ SPMV/ STPM	-	-	-	-	48	23.6 %
Diploma	-	-	28	36.8 %	26	12.8 %
Bachelor's degree	12	12.0 %	39	51.4 %	129	63.6 %
Master's degree	24	24.0 %	9	11.8 %	-	-
Doctoral degree	64	64.0 %	-	-	-	-

Table. 1 (continued)

Demographic Variable	Educator (n=129)		Employer (n=85)		Graduate (n=203)	
	Respondent	Percentage	Respondent	Percentage	Respondent	Percentage
Program Major in Engineering:						
Mechanical	25	20.0 %	-	-	11	7.1 %
Chemical	13	10.4 %	-	-	16	10.4 %
Electrical/ Electronic	57	45.6 %	-	-	81	52.6 %
Civil	28	22.4 %	-	-	34	22.1 %
Others	2	1.6 %	-	-	12	7.8 %
Involvement in Employability Skills Training Programs:						
Yes	14	14.6 %	10	12.0 %	-	-
No	82	85.4 %	73	88.0 %	-	-
Present Position:						
CEO/ President/ Director	-	-	9	11.0 %	-	-
Manager/ Head of Department	-	-	47	57.3 %	-	-
Supervisor	-	-	26	31.7 %	-	-

Company Size:

Large (more than 500 employees)	-	-	22	26.2 %	-	-
Medium (100 - 499 employees)	-	-	17	20.2 %	-	-
Small (less than 100 employees)	-	-	45	53.6 %	-	-

Training Program:

INSEP

WTTP

GEMS	-	-	-	-	10	4.9 %
INSEP	-	-	-	-	145	71.4 %
WTTP	-	-	-	-	48	23.7 %

The manufacturing employers were 70.0% male and 30.0% female; the majority of them were 40 years of age or older. The respondents were 52.7% Malay, 36.5% Chinese, and 10.8% Indian. Approximately 63.2% of the employers had earned at least a bachelor's degree. The respondents were 11.0% CEO/president/ director, 57.3% manager/head of a department, and 31.7% supervisor. Additionally, a total of 60.7% of the companies were locally owned, 23.8% were international corporately owned, and 15.5% were joint-venture ownership. Nearly all employers who participated in the survey were not involved in any employability skills training programs in Malaysia.

In this study, recent graduates were 69.5% male and 30.5% female. Approximately 89.0% of the participants were 24 years of age or younger and 11.0% were 25 years of age or older. The respondents were 80.6% Malay, 6.5% Chinese, and 12.9% Indian. The respondents consisted of 63.6% bachelor's degree, 12.8% diploma (two-year degree), and 23.6% SPM/ SPMV/ STPM (secondary school) holders. In terms of program major, the percentages of the participants who majored in Electrical/ Electronic Engineering, Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering were 52.6%, 22.1%, 10.4%, and 7.1%, respectively. The majority of recent graduates who participated in this study enrolled in the Industrial Skills Enhancement Program (INSEP).

Table 2 displays written responses on the survey. The responses were coded into themes. These themes addressed the perceptions of educators, employers, and recent graduates regarding obstacles that could impede employability skills training programs in Malaysia. Educators ranked unclear objectives and direction of training programs as the most important obstacles. There was no apparent detailed information for the public about training programs available in the workforce. The educator participants perceived negative attitudes of recent graduates during training as an important barrier. Recent graduates' personal attitudes seemed to hinder development of their knowledge and skills. Educators perceived administration and management of training programs as critical obstacles. Other obstacles were lack of employer involvement and lack of support from governmental agencies. Limited contributions by industries suggested that there were limited agreement and cooperation between higher education institutions and employers in the development of the Malaysian workforce.

Employers ranked recent graduates' attitudes as the most critical barrier that could impede training programs. Negative attitudes hindered recent graduates' ability to acquire knowledge and

skills offered by training programs. Employers perceived that the objectives and direction of training programs were not clear; ineffective administration and management were also problematic. A lack of government support and a stagnant economic environment were other obstacles that were identified in this study.

Recent graduates ranked lack of involvement of employers in workforce education and training as the most important barrier that impedes the progress of training programs. Malaysian employers were perceived to be generally disinterested about being responsible for education and training. The second most critical barrier was the administration and management of training programs. Poor management and lack of effective administration likely impede the progress of training programs. Other obstacles included negative attitudes of recent graduates, unclear objectives and direction of programs, and poor economic conditions. The findings suggested that recent graduates were most concerned about the credibility of training programs in providing them with industrial knowledge and skills in the workplace.

Table 2: Obstacles to employability skills training programs

Educator		Employer		Recent Graduate	
Issue	Rank (Frequency)	Issue	Rank (Frequency)	Issue	Rank (Frequency)
Unclear objectives and direction of training programs and non-standardized training program models and curriculums	1 (24)	Negative attitudes of recent graduates during training programs	1 (15)	Employers not actively involved in workforce education and training	1 (18)
Negative attitudes of recent graduates during training programs	2 (23)	Unclear objectives and direction of training programs and non-standardized training program models and curriculums	2 (10)	Administration and management of training programs	2 (12)
Administration and management of training programs	2 (23)	Administration and management of training programs	3 (9)	Negative attitudes of recent graduates during training programs	2 (12)
Employers not actively involved in workforce education and training	4 (18)	Insufficient support from government, such as funding, monitoring, encouragement, legislation, and commitment	4 (6)	Unclear objectives and direction of training programs and non-standardized training program models and curriculums	4 (10)
Insufficient support from government,	5 (13)	Problems and issues in the economy	5 (5)	Problems and issues in the economy	5 (6)

such as funding,
monitoring,
encouragement,
legislation, and
commitment

affecting recent
graduates

affecting recent
graduates

From the Table 2, we can see that there is a pattern and trends based on the perceptions of educators, employers, and recent graduates regarding barriers of employability skills training programs in Malaysia. All respondent groups agreed that providers of training programs have unclear direction and objectives in terms of the outcome or product of their programs. They seem do not have a long term plan for products of their program but just fulfil demands from the government to assist them in improving the workforce of Malaysia and minimizing current unemployment. This feedback clearly identified by educators, employers, and graduates from this research. Another similarities of perceptions among three groups of respondents related to obstacles of training programs are discipline of trainees and poor administration of training programs. Respondents ranked them among the top obstacles and shared their agreement uniformly. Trainees of the training programs demonstrated lack of discipline in order to follow rules and regulations set by the programs. They seem has no understanding about rules and regulations during the training programs. This attitude must be controlled and guided since childhood age in order to nurture the good habit among the workforce of Malaysia. Moreover, training providers or administration must implement good and professional work procedure in conducting training. Administrators of training programs should consider all the trainees are professional in their field and should follow all the safety and standard procedure similar to industries. This practice might help in succeeding local employability skills training programs and reduce the obstacles from administration and management of the program.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that the respondents viewed the administration and management of employability skills training programs, attitudes of trainees, objectives and direction of programs, and employer involvement in education and training as the most important obstacles. These obstacles should be addressed to ensure the progress of training programs. By addressing these obstacles, training programs can play their roles effectively. The respondents perceived that improvement was needed in the administration and management of training programs, including planning, implementation, and outcomes. Aligned with Stufflebeam's (1983) evaluation model, these areas need to be assessed and evaluated to determine the effectiveness of employability skills training programs. Additionally, government and employers are the primary stakeholders in workforce development. The respondents seemed convinced that increasing employer participation and government support can improve the effectiveness of program assessment, planning, implementation, and outcomes. This concept has been successfully practiced in modern and developing nations around the globe, including Germany, Japan, and Singapore (Seng, 2011). This concept should become one of the key reforms of workforce development in Malaysia (Leong, 2011).

It can be concluded that most respondents share the similar agreements and perceptions regarding the obstacles of employability skills training programs. Even though all of them are from different group and background but they ended up almost similar themes of barriers. There are not many differences among their responses except the minor perceptions with small number of frequencies. The researcher concluded that there are similarities and uniformities of perceptions among educators, employers, and graduates that make the results of this study can be justified for.

One of the shortcomings of the study is small number of educator and employer respondents who were participated in employability skills training programs. Only 14.6% of educator respondents were involved in any employability skills training programs. Meanwhile, only 12.0% of the employers were conducted and involved in local employability skills training programs. These numbers are not convincing to represent the sample of the study. Even though the non-participated respondents in training programs gave their perceptions and feedback based on their experiences and expertise, the results might be biased and unreliable. The feedback on the barriers of training programs might be just from their perceptions and assumptions only, not from the actual cause and real situation. Thus, findings from this study is limited and not capable to generalize to wider population.

As a top-list investment in Human Capital Theory, the training programs should be allowed to function their operations and program effectively. Failure to ensure these programs run smoothly, the results will affect our critical investment and our future is at a stake. In addition, without serious consideration and action taken from responsible parties, knowledge and skills gain among Malaysian workforce will be restrained. This situation will affect other areas of economy and social, such as country wealth and profit, workforce efficacy and productivity, and national security and safety. Therefore, the results from this study should get attention from stakeholders to ensure local employability skills training programs able to overcome barriers and obstacles as listed in Table 4. Any efforts, resources, provisions, and cooperation from any level of administration should be combined integrally to minimize problems and obstacles that could impede the progress of training programs.

In this study, feedback on obstacles was gathered related to employability skills training programs. The responses contributed to performance measures of the programs, such as effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and safety. Although limited to the perceptions of the respondents, the measures of training programs are important for consideration by governmental agencies and local training centres. These results become the starting point for further assessment and evaluation involving employability skills training programs.

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