

## **EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES OF IMPORTANT EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FOR PRE-VOCATIONAL PROGRAM STUDENTS IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the implementation of the Pre-Vocational Program in 1999, 1 492 students completed the program, but only 230 students were employed in government and private sectors. It is argued that students lack employability skills. There were three main purposes for conducting the study. The first purpose was to identify employability skills emphasize by employers. The second purpose was to explore the employers' perspectives on employability skills according to the importance placed by them. The third purpose was to find out if the employers would be interested to support schools in the Pre-Vocational Program. As there was no new study on the Pre-Vocational Program since 2011, the researcher selected an exploratory case study to explore the perspectives of employers on employability skills according to emphasis and importance. Hence, the research took the form of a quantitative exploratory case study whereby quantitative data were collected via an online survey in English. Ten employers who had experienced with Pre-Vocational Program students undergoing work attachment at their premises responded to the online survey. The study took two weeks to complete. The result of the survey showed that the top 8 skills emphasize by employers were "following instructions", "deal with others with honesty and integrity", "acting positively towards change", "cooperating with others", "working in a team", "interacting with others", "maintain cleanliness" and "demonstrate punctuality". In terms of importance with regards to employability skills, "resource skills" "personal qualities" and "basic skills" were ranked highly by employers. The findings provide insights on employability skills valued by employers that can be incorporated into the Pre-Vocational Program and how teachers can be supported to develop students' employability skills as a preliminary step towards positive outcomes.

*Keywords:* employability skills, homeroom teachers, employers, a pre-vocational program in *Brunei*, vocational education

### **Introduction**

The year 1994 marked a turning point in the educational landscape of Brunei Darussalam through the introduction of inclusive education and its underpinning philosophy. Acceptance of the inclusive education philosophy was the result of Brunei Darussalam's commitment to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs (UNESCO, 1994).

One of the initiatives introduced by the Ministry of Education to support students with special educational needs in inclusive schools was the introduction of the Pre-Vocational Program. Pre-Vocational Program is a 5-year program specially designed for students with high support needs and students with learning difficulties. Currently, there are 28 selected government secondary schools implementing the program. According to Musim and Wong

(2006), the program aims to assist special educational needs students to 1) acquire a basic academic, social, daily living, and pre-vocational skills; 2) develop their potentials and prepare them for adult life; and 3) become useful, contributing members of society. Since its introduction in the year 1999, a total of 1 492 students graduated from the program. Nevertheless, only 230 graduates managed to find jobs in hospitality, farming and food beverages industries, while the remaining 1 262 graduates are still looking for jobs ("Pre-Vocational Graduates", 2016). In addition, some parents of these unemployed graduates felt that the program did not prepare their children for work life. These parents noted that their children still lacked employability skills.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the study were three-fold. First, the study sought to identify employability skills emphasized by employers. The second aim was to explore employers' perspectives on the importance of employability skills. Lastly, the third aim was to find out if employers would be interested to support schools implementing the Pre-Vocational Program

### **Research Questions**

The study was designed to answer three research questions:

1. What are the employability skills emphasize by employers?
2. What employability skills do employers value most important?
3. Do employers have the interest to support schools implementing the Pre-Vocational Program?

### **Methodology**

The research used quantitative data collected through an online survey. Respondents were identified using purposeful sampling (Creswell 2014) who had knowledge of the research questions. The respondents involved in the study were employers who had given cooperation and support to the Pre-Vocational Program by providing students with disabilities the opportunities to undergo work placement at their respective work premises. The online survey was in the English format comprising 12 questions for employers. Items in the survey were adapted from Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (2001), Buntat, Jabor, Mansor and Mustaffa (2012) and Ab Halim, Bakar, Hamzah and Mat Rashid (2013). Question 10 in the survey consisted of a list of statements relating to common skills for employers to select from and add alternative skills under "others". Question 11 in the survey also required each employer to answer using a five-point Likert. There were 29 skills listed under Question 11. A high value given to a skill indicates high importance whereas a low value indicates the opposite. The data collection took two weeks to complete.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Employment of People with Disabilities**

As a contributing member of society, we need to work and earn a living. As such, work is an important activity that enables us to become a useful and contributing member of society (Isaac, Dharma Raja, & Ravanan, 2010). For people with disabilities, being able to work and earn a living can help them feel less socially isolated (Landy & Conte, 2007). Physical barriers or exclusion created by the non-disabled population caused the social isolation experienced by people with disabilities (Antonak & Livneh, 2000).

Being employed also helps individuals to define a place in their community. However, employment remains an issue for people with disabilities as they still experience

higher rates of unemployment compared to the general population (Heymann, Stein, Moreno, & De Elvira Moreno, 2014).

Literature indicates that employers' perspective is one of the most important factors contributing to the low employment rate of people with disabilities (Jones, 2011). Generally, employers hold a negative perspective toward the inclusion and employment of people with disabilities in the workplace (Gustafsson, Prieto, Peralta & Danermark, 2013). Employers express concerns regarding people with disabilities' lack of employability skills as one of the factors contributing to the negative perception of them (Ju, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013). In a study by Domzal, Houtenville, and Sharma (2008), employers were not actively recruiting people with disabilities citing a lack of employability skills and experience as reasons for not hiring. According to Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006), employers viewed employability skills to be important for work readiness.

### **Employability Skills**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalization and advancement in technologies have caused drastic changes in workplace practices. In fact, the world's industrial sectors such as manufacturing, marketing, information and communication technology and others are rapidly changing leading to a highly competitive industry widely described as the Fourth Industrial Revolution or Industry 4.0 (Schwab, 2016). To accommodate rapid changes, employers seek a dynamic and versatile workforce. In effect, it has undeniably caused a shift in the skills demanded by employers. Current employers expect their employees to have relevant personality traits and employability skills to accommodate constant changes in work demands (Messum, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2015, Zaharim, Yusoff, Omar, Mohamed & Muhamad, 2009). According to Yusoff, Omar, Zaharim, Mohamed, Muhamad, and Mustapha (2010) employers find employability skills other than academics to be more important in the recruitment process. Employability skills refer to a set of skills that allow individuals to obtain and succeed in employment (Lorraine & Sewell, 2007). Lankard (1990) classified seven categories of employability skills namely "demonstrate positive image", "demonstrate positive work behavior", "practice good work habits", "effective communication", "responsibility", "cooperative" and finally "ethical". Possessing employability skills is considered as an attribute of employees which makes them an asset to employers (Buck & Barrick, 1987).

Top four employability skills identified and ranked in order by employers were "ability to work as a team", "decision-making and "problem-solving", "verbal communication", and "plan, organize and prioritize work" (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014). In addition, ten most frequently identified employability skills encompass "integrity", "communication", "courtesy", "responsibility", "social skills", "positive attitude", "professionalism", "flexibility", "teamwork", and "work ethic" (Robles, 2012). The greatest feature of employability skills is that the skills are transferable across workplaces (Overtoom, 2000).

Such economic and technological change mentioned previously has created more challenges for people with disabilities to obtain employment. Employers are concerned with safety, attendance, productivity, punctuality, appearance, social skills, and other employability skills (Unger, 2002). This is consistent with a study conducted by **Ju, Zhang, and Pacha** (2012) which sought to identify skills valued by employers when considering employing individuals with and without disabilities. The result of the study indicated the top four most frequently identified employability skills include "integrity/honesty", "ability to follow directions", "respectful toward others", and "dependability". The fifth most frequently identified skill for an individual without was "ability to read with understanding" while for those with disabilities was "ability to show high regard for safety procedures".

In relation to the Pre-Vocational Program, many of the graduates are still unemployed. Haji Abdul Tahir (2011) argued that it is due to students' lack of employability skills, job-related skills and employers' perception of equating impairment with inability. In the program, students with moderate to severe learning impairments are generally taught basic academic skills, living and social skills and basic vocational and work skills based on a guideline prepared by Special Education Unit (Ismail, 2011). Upon completion of the 5-year program, each student only receives a participatory certificate from the Ministry of Education. For students with disabilities, it is crucial for them to be taught employability skills in schools as the skills are important for job search and job retention leading to successful employment (Bryen, Potts, & Carey, 2007; Guy, Sitlington, Larsen, & Frank, 2009). In fact, developing employability skills, in reality, is a long process and needs to be developed from young under parents' guidance and through teaching and learning, co-curricular activities and many programs held in schools (Subramaniam, 2013). Therefore it is particularly imperative to identify critical skills valued by employers in Brunei Darussalam specifically by those employers that hosted Pre-Vocational Program students for work attachment so that it can be incorporated into the program in terms of vocational training

## Findings

### Demographics

Table 1 describes the demographic profile of the employers who responded to the survey. A total of 10 employers attempted the survey whereby 5 were males and 5 were females. It also showed that 5 out of 10 employers had a Bachelor's Degree and only 2 had a Master Degree. In addition, 5 out of 10 employers held managerial positions.

Table 1 *Participating Employers' Profiles*

Company and Position	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
Company A Manager Bachelor Degree 8 years				1 20
Company B Manager Bachelor Degree 12 years			1	20
Company C Manager Bachelor Degree 10 years			1	20
Manager GCE O Level 25 years				1 20

EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE OF IMPORTANT EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FOR

Company and Position	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
Company D				
CEO				
Bachelor Degree	1	20		
30 years				
Director				
Master Degree				
3 years	1	20		
Manager				
Master Degree				
More than				
5 years	1	20		
Company E				
Manager Master Degree				
More than				
20 years			1	20
Company F				
Supervisor				
Higher National				
Diploma				
1 year	1	20		
Supervisor				
Diploma				
2 years	1	20		
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>

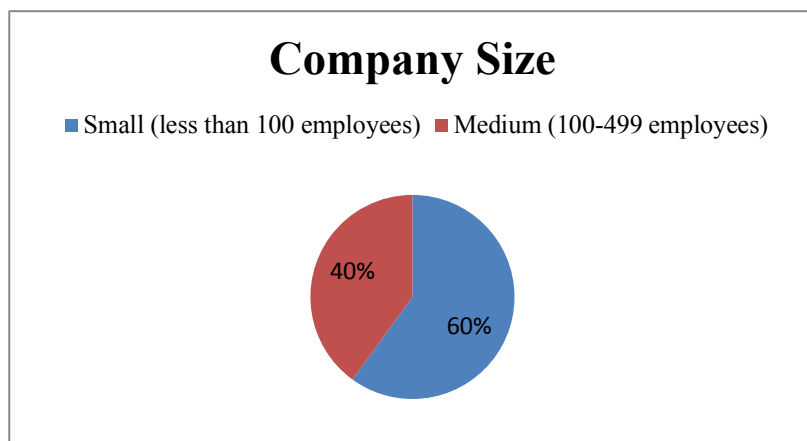


Figure 1 Company Size

Figure 1 shows that 60% of the employers were from medium-size companies whereas 40% were from small size companies.

**Employability Skills emphasized by Employers**

Table 2 shows the employability skills emphasized by employers. Top 8 skills emphasized by employers are “following instructions”(100%), “deal with others with honesty

and integrity”(100%), “acting positively towards change” (100%), “cooperating with others”(100%), “working in a team”(100%), “interacting with others”(100%), “maintain cleanliness” (100%) and “demonstrate punctuality”(100%).

Table 2 *Employability emphasized by Employers*

Skills emphasized by employers	N	Responses %
Following Instructions	10	100%
Deal with others with honesty and integrity	10	100%
Acting positively towards change	10	100%
Cooperating with others	10	100%
Working in a team	10	100%
Interacting with others	10	100%
Maintain cleanliness	10	100%
Demonstrate punctuality	10	100%
Taking responsibility for own actions and decisions	8	80%
Be aware of personal safety	8	80%
Follow a dress code or uniform guidelines	8	80%
Personal grooming (clean hands, trimmed nails, clean teeth, clean face, nicely combed hair and so on)	8	80%
Maintaining personal hygiene	8	80%
Show a high level of efforts and dedication	8	80%

### **Important Employability Skills according to Employers' Perspectives**

Employability skills' means were ranked in order from higher to the lowest mean value and arranged accordingly in Table 3. The highest mean indicates higher importance placed by the teachers and employers. According to the employers, the top 3 employability skills were “resource skills” (M=4.45, SD= 0.60) was ranked highly followed by “personal qualities” (M=4.41, SD=0.92) and “basic skills” (M=4.34, SD=0.92). Resource skills refer to the ability to identify, organize, plan and allocate resources such as time and money. Personal qualities refer to individual traits to be successful in the workplace. Basic skills cover reading, writing, counting and communicating.

Table 3 *Importance of Employability Skills according to Employers' Perspectives*

	<b>Employability Skills Components</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Item No</b>	<b>Resource Skills</b>	<b>4.45</b>	<b>0.60</b>
20	Time Management	4.50	0.71
21	Money Management	4.40	0.52
	<b>Personal Qualities</b>	<b>4.41</b>	<b>0.92</b>
16	Integrity	4.60	0.97
12	Responsible	4.50	0.97
17	Self-Discipline	4.50	0.97
15	Self-Management	4.40	0.97
13	Self-Confidence	4.40	1.07
25	Serving Customers	4.30	0.82
14	Social Ability	4.30	0.95
18	Adaptability	4.30	0.95
	<b>Basic Skills</b>	<b>4.34</b>	<b>0.92</b>
1	Reading	4.40	0.70
2	Writing	4.40	0.70
5	Communication	4.40	1.26
4	Listening	4.30	1.06
3	Counting	4.20	0.92
	<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>	<b>4.31</b>	<b>0.75</b>
23	Teamwork	4.60	0.70
28	Working with people from different backgrounds	4.40	0.52
24	Teach Others	4.30	0.67
29	Resolving conflicts	4.30	0.82
26	Being a leader of a team	4.20	0.79
27	Ability to negotiate	4.20	0.79
19	Ability to work independently	4.20	1.03
	<b>Thinking Skills</b>	<b>4.10</b>	<b>0.88</b>
7	Making Decisions	4.20	0.79
11	Reasoning	4.20	0.79
8	Problem Solving	4.20	0.92
6	Creative and Innovative	4.10	0.99
10	Knowing how to learn	4.00	1.05
9	Visualizing	3.90	0.88
	<b>Information Skills</b>	<b>4.00</b>	<b>1.15</b>
29	Demonstrating Computer Skills	4.00	1.15

### Employers' Reasons to Support Schools

Table 4 depicts the reasons shared by employers in Brunei Darussalam to support schools. In the survey, employers were asked reasons for accepting students for work attachment at their premises. 60% of employers mentioned that it was an opportunity for them to provide community service as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and followed by contributing to students' learning (40%). During work attachment, employers were able to monitor the students and identify possible skilled and motivated future workers (30%). Additionally, employers would like to develop a link with schools (30%) and contribute to the curriculum design process (20%).

Table 4 *Employers' Reasons to Support Schools*

NO	Reasons	N	%
1	Opportunity to provide community service as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	6	60
2	Contribute to students' learning	4	40
3	Developing link between employer and school	3	30
4	Identify skilled and motivated future worker	3	30
5	Contribute to curriculum design process	2	20
6	Towards practical and long-life learning	1	10

### Discussions

The study sought to identify the employability skills emphasized by employers in Brunei Darussalam. According to Table 2, employers had put more emphasis on “deal with others with honesty and integrity” (100%). This was consistent in Table 3 where “integrity” (m=4.60) had the highest mean under “personal qualities”. In addition, “cooperating with others” (100%) and “working in a team” (100%) in Table 2 were valued highly. This was consistent with the results in Table 3 where “teamwork” (m=4.60) and “working with others with different backgrounds” (m=4.40), both also had the highest mean under “interpersonal skills”. Other skills emphasized by employers to take note of according to Table 2 were “Following instruction” (100%), “maintain cleanliness” (100%) and “demonstrate punctuality” (100%). Corresponding to Table 3, this was also consistent with “communication” (m=4.40) under “basic skills” and “self-management” (m=4.40) under “personal qualities” where both were ranked third. Maintaining cleanliness and demonstrating punctuality were categorized under reliability within self-management as it encompassed self-control, reliability, positive attitude and presentation (Haji Abdul Tahir, 2011). Reliability, in particular, refers to consistent attendance, time-keeping and standards whereas presentation refer to consistently clean, tidy and properly dressed (Haji Abdul Tahir, 2011).

The study has also sought to examine the perspectives of employers on employability skills according to its importance. Top 3 employability skills were “personal qualities”, “resource skills” and “basic skills”. Generally, employers valued “responsible”, “integrity”, “self-discipline”, “self-management”, “self-confidence” to be important under “personal qualities”. Under “resource skills”, employer valued highly “time management” followed by “money management” skills. For “personal qualities”, employers ranked “integrity” as top skill.



For “basic skills”, employers valued the top 3 skills namely “reading”, “writing” and “communication” followed by “listening” and “counting”. The findings of the study served as a reminder to schools that basic skills (reading, writing and communicating) were still clearly valued by employers *Ju, Zhang, and Pacha* (2012). Thus, schools should continually emphasize teaching basic academic skills and provide sufficient instructions to their students with disabilities. The findings further confirmed that top-rated employability skills were fundamental personal attributes rather than job-specific skills.

Employers demand public schools to teach employability skills because it is a prerequisite for job readiness and valued by employers (Cotton, 2008). This was consistent with a study by *Ju, Zhang, and Pacha* (2012) *where they identified* top employability skills emphasized by employers to take note of which were “the following instruction”, “being punctual”, “being respectful”, “sufficient basic skills (reading, writing and communicating)” and “basic work skills (attendance, follow schedules and stay on task and monitor quality of work)”.

In short, *Ju, Zhang, and Pacha* (2012) indicated that employers value personal attributes and nonspecific job skills over technical skills. Therefore vocational training curriculum should emphasize positive work attitudes, habits and social skills.

### **Limitations**

The limitation of the study was 10 employers participated. Thus, the study is not to generalize but rather the results provide useful insights on employability skills valued by employers in Brunei Darussalam that can be incorporated into the Pre-Vocational Program and how teachers can be supported to develop students' employability skills as a preliminary step towards positive outcomes. Future studies can be replicated by involving more employers in Brunei Darussalam.

### **Recommendations**

By recognizing the employability skills demanded by employers, it could lead to better job training and preparation. Teachers need to incorporate employability skills into skill training or allocate more time to teaching them (McCrea, 1991). Teaching the students' employability skills could make the difference for them being hired for a job in their field (Evenson, 1999). Rabey (2008) suggested that secondary schools need to place more emphasis on life skills, work skills and knowledge of the workplace in order to improve secondary schools' ways to prepare their students for the workforce. The finding of the study also highlighted employers' interest in supporting schools. Reasons given by the employers were contributing to curriculum design, offering work placement opportunities for students to gain work experience at their premises and stimulated work activities in schools by providing suitable resources as part of corporate social responsibility. Additionally, the literature suggests that by partnering between industry and educational institutions it can help to narrow the skill gaps (Wormer, Finkelstein, and Shuan Han, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Employability skills have become more important in the present job market. Thus, the findings of the study have an implication on the training of Pre-Vocational Program students. The employability skills valued by employers can be incorporated in the program to further develop and enhance students' employability skills giving them a competitive edge and opportunity for possible employment after completing the Pre-Vocational Program.

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