RE-EXAMINE MALAYSIAN HEIs GRADUATES’ EMPLOYABILITY: COMPARING PERSPECTIVES FROM GRADUATES AND EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

As a strategic mechanism to secure graduates’ employment, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia are urged to refine the employability/generic skills within their academic weightage through the implementation of the revised version of the National Blueprint of Graduate Employability 2012 - 2017. This study reports on the perceptions of graduates and employers on the development of graduates’ employability skills after the policy was revised in 2012. In measuring whether the skills have improved, we analysed the perceptions of 360 graduates and 360 employers through an official questionnaire from the Ministry of Higher Education’s tracer study items to obtain the relevant feedback. We also interviewed six graduates to attain information on graduates’ satisfaction and beneficial aspects of the revised policy. In conclusion, graduates felt contented with the policy revision which has much improved their non-technical assets as additional capacities for potential job placement. Nonetheless, the employers assessment have pointed that graduates’ leadership, critical thinking, and decision-making require further enhancement in order to improve graduates’ generics skills.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Graduates’ Ratings, Employers’ Perceptions, Higher Education, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In the 70s and 80s, higher education aggressively played a crucial role in producing knowledgeable workers for the workforce. During this era, the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia aimed to improve students’ socioeconomic roles and mobility as part of the national economic planning strategy (Sirat, 2005; Wan Muda, 2008). Through the human capital model, schools and higher education served to provide training and programs as instrumental and substantial mediators not just for producing knowledgeable, skillful, and quality workers (Schultz, 1975) but also for facilitating the nation’s economic growth in a knowledge-context society (Castells, 1994; Chan & When-Lin, 2015). Scholars have believed that the role of universities is not limited to conducting research and publication, but also to creating human capital and higher-skilled labour (Schiller & Liefner, 2007). This development indirectly has much potential in fiscal and productivity growths, particularly in cultivating a nation’s innovations (Schaaper, 2014).

The training and knowledge of students in HEIs are considered a significant investment that yields beneficial social and private returns (Tomlinson, 2008). Highly skilled and knowledgeable workers provide social value through their participations and qualifications, and they contribute to private returns through their higher earnings, which will facilitate their career paths towards a wider scope of job market. Through the trainings provided by HEIs, workers’ quality is improved and becomes an asset to a nation’s growth and development. Trained workers receive better earnings than their counterparts because their skills are required by the job market. At the same time, the government...
creates skilled and knowledgeable workers because both parties benefit from the establishment of higher education institutions (Chan, 2011) as a training catalyst for graduates. Nevertheless, the expansion of higher education can cause “overflows” and overqualified graduates, which can lead to graduates’ underemployment due to the high numbers of graduates within the job market (Brynin, 2002).

The Revised Policy on Malaysian Graduates’ Employability

In 2012, MOHE launched the revised policy on graduates’ employability policy as a framework called *The National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017*. The objective was to handle graduates’ employability challenges and issues with the expansion of HEIs in Malaysia using four major charters. First, the enrichment system intends to provide Malaysia with future human capital who are (1) knowledgeable, (2) creative, (3) imbued with social and personal attributes, and (4) able to compete in the global market of employment. Second, HEIs are also urged to provide local graduates with the prospects to realise their professional dreams that would steer their passion in acquiring knowledge and skills within the efficient, committed, and productive workforce conceptualisation. Third, HEIs are advised to design a better curriculum that stresses on technical knowledge with adequate emphasis on generic skills, the purpose being to equip graduates with the attributes and skills required in the working environment. Fourth, the efforts to achieve sustainable employability for HEIs graduates through an effective system should be institutionalised in order to respond to the actual needs of the workplace and the economy (MOHE, 2012b). Through these four thrusts (Figure 1), MOHE introduces the Graduate Employability Attribute Framework which consists of academic, personality management, exploration, and connectivity attributes of Malaysian HEIs graduates. These attributes are described as follows:

- Within the academic attributes, graduates should possess a good academic achievement through high grades linked with their high involvement in extra-curricular activities. They are also required to have some exposure within their area of expertise and prior knowledge through practical and internship approaches in order to prepared them for actual working experiences.
- At the same time, graduates will be ingrained with ethical values and integrity through the attributes of responsibility and positive attitudes. Leadership skills are simultaneously incorporated as a crucial element within this framework together with adaptability skills to provide graduates with flexibility criteria.
- In the exploration attributes, the framework aims to produce graduates who are highly imaginative, innovative, and critical thinkers; this will be beneficial in the working situation.
- In the final attribute, graduates will be trained in communications and teamwork elements to provide them with crucial group dynamics qualities and improve their interpersonal skills. Added to these attributes is their awareness in technology integration in boosting their knowledge and performance. Commercial awareness is also aimed in order to increase the graduates’ acquaintance with their prospective career (MOHE 2012b).

Using the official framework, MOHE entails a strategic execution plan for HEIs to implement these attributes. The link between academia and industry was also added to the execution plan to obtain inputs and skills required for graduates within their particular work area. The second stage is the introduction of the advanced plan, with the last stage being the execution plan. In the initial phase, HEIs are required to have their own graduate programs that are based on each individual HEIs context. In order to create graduates’ employability programs, inputs and information from faculties are used to provide knowledge and technical weightage to the relevant programme. At the same time, inputs from industry are also being accepted as elements that should be integrated to enhance the programme. In the second stage, all relevant information are integrated within students’ curricula, extra-curricular activity, and practical and internship contexts, with the intention of linking graduates with industry and the community. In the implementation phase, the element of curricula will be implemented within the faculty’s context through student-centred learning, and likewise, industrial partners are considered as graduates’ partners in providing them with the workplace knowledge and employability skills needed by the industry (MOHE, 2012b).
LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduates’ Unemployment Issues

Previous scholars have adopted various definitions for non-academic or non-technical knowledge known as generic or soft skills, which are applied within their workplace or job-context situations (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). The definitions have been used interchangeably to address generic skills. Some researchers have used the term generic skills (Treleaven, & Voola, 2008), soft skills (Zhang, 2012; Abdul Karim et al., 2012; Shakir, 2009; Pillai et al., 2012), and non-technical skills (Washer, 2015), although some believe that they refer to the same skills or dispositions known as employability skills required by employers. Schultz (2008) defines soft skills as personality traits that include (1) relationship, (2) interpersonal network such as team work, and (3) critical and analytical skills used in solving problems and decision making. Other scholars note a strong link between the rudiments of employability and graduates’ attributes in terms of soft skills (Kember & Leung, 2005). In this article, we define generic skills as humanistic skills that incorporate non-academic skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication, teamwork and others skills related to graduates skills, all of which are required for workplace specifications.

Bowden et al. (2000) critically describe non-academic or non-technical competencies skills as beyond the academic expertise or technical knowledge suited to graduates’ humanistic skills. The issue of generics deficiencies among graduates is not merely found among Malaysian graduates, but also among the graduates in other countries including in the United Kingdom (Bailey & Ingimundardottir, 2015). In 2008, Branine studied seven hundred employers from the United Kingdom and found that more than 60 per cent of graduates have poor generic or soft skills. Later, Mason et al. (2009) reported that employers in the UK felt that the HEIs should make more efforts in improving graduates in order to avoid repercussions on UK graduates job market. Other researchers have also believed that HEIs are “restraint institutions” that should follow the process of developing, improving, and assessing graduates in non-academics competencies in order to nurture higher order thinking skills as a preparation for their workplace context (Markwell, 2007; Tymon, 2013; Heaton et al., 2008). Towards this end, HEIs should play major roles in enhancing graduates’ non-technical skills as a preparation for their workplace situations (Heaton et al., 2008). Suggestions include for the institutions to instill non-
technical skills within the students’ academic programs (Harvey, 2005). As Tomlinson (2012) points out that the universities have been too academically oriented and neglecting the generic intellectuality of their graduates. In debating these issues, Kreber (2006) advocates that higher education should not be pressured to enhance graduates’ employability because the role of higher education is to (1) disseminate knowledge and conduct research, as well as (2) increase student population with the least resources available (Kreber, 2006; Rae, 2007).

In Malaysia, graduates employability and skills has been continually debated (Abdul Karim et al., 2012; Zaharim et al., 2011) to determine whether they possess high disposition and knowledge. The discussions were prompted by the persisting issues of unemployment and low employability rates among local graduates especially those from the social science, business, and law, who were unable to secure positions in the job markets (Malaysian National Education Statistics 2013; Yoong et al., 2016). Shakir (2009) argues that the unemployment of local graduates has been due to two factors: (1) the graduates being generally high achievers academically but lacking in soft skills, and (2) the globalisation of the workforce and job market, which forces the graduates to balance their academic achievements with their social astuteness or “people skills” (good communication, leadership, and analytical skills) (Human Development Sector Report, 2007). Other empirical studies have attributed the unemployment of local graduates to (1) lack of generic or employability skills (Nurita et al., 2010) and (2) poor communication proficiency (Singh & Singh, 2008). In discussing these issues, Direito et al. (2012) remark that most undergraduates do not realise the importance of soft skills in their future career whereas these skills, according to employers, include tenets, social attentiveness, and generic intellectuality other than academic achievements (Tomlinson, 2012). As King (2012) elucidates, in today’s complex and competitive markets, it is inevitable that future graduates not only emphasise their academic and technical achievements but also provide themselves with the softer skills of leadership and communication to offer extra qualities to their potential employer.

Accordingly, scholars who have researched graduates’ employability skills including Abdul Rahim et al. (2007) have stressed the importance of several generic skills components, such as communication, interpersonal skills, leadership and teamwork, these skills are considered required by Malaysian employers, especially in the private sector, in selecting their potential workforce. Accordingly, MOHE have emphasised the importance of generic skills to be incorporated in the programs of all private and public universities and higher learning institutions, particularly the elements of soft or generic employability skills among students within their undergraduate syllabus since 2006. This was part of the national initiative to produce knowledgeable and competent local graduates with high soft-skills capabilities (MOHE, 2006; Zaharim et al., 2010).

Recent Findings on Graduates’ Employability Policy from Employers’ Perspectives

Although the ministry has emphasised the implementation of employability or generic skills among Malaysian graduates, cautions have been addressed (Shakir, 2009) that soft or employability skills remain a difficult element to measure because the attribute varies according to individual character and background. The attribute is also believed to be caused by the “root and remembering learning process” with its accent on academic and examination-based achievements (Thang, 2003). These limitations are relevant not only in Malaysia but also in other higher educational systems. Hence, it is advocated that studies on graduates’ employability skills be continually carried out to determine whether graduates have achieved some improvement in their employability skills after the execution of the revised policy from various viewpoints: graduates and their employers as graduates’ potential superiors.

A few studies have acknowledged the employers’ standpoint whether the graduates have improved their employability skills after the implementation of the revised policy on graduates’ employability in 2012. Through the lenses of the graduates who have undergone the instilling process within their academic weightage, majority of them admitted that the policy has definitely improved their self-confidence; they also noted their high satisfaction having developed their generic intellectuality (Lee et al., 2014; Natrah & Kamil, 2015). In European countries, after the Bologna Process, researchers have been using remarks and current findings from employers to examine and evaluate the development process of graduates’ employability skills that have prepared them for job-placement.
One study by Humburg et al. (2013) reports that employers favoured graduates who (1) have high professional expertise skills such as skills in subject-specific knowledge and (2) are highly critical. The employers studied also chose graduates with good interpersonal skills (communication skills, teamwork skills) and professional expertise skills because the former believed that graduates who secured these skills can give positive impact to the organisation. Earlier in 2010, Gallup Organisation reported that ability to work as a team member, communication skills, and computer literacy were the skills considered by employers in conscripting HEI graduates. Hence, it is argued that employers’ perceptions should remain a vital indicator in determining whether graduates have developed their employability skills after the revised policy was officially implemented at HEIs in 2012.

In the local context, only a few studies concern the viewpoints of employers as HEIs’ stakeholders. Abdul Hamid et al. (2016) adopted the IPA method to reveal graduates’ generic inability as perceived by 233 employers from the private and public entities across the Malaysian peninsular. The findings indicate that the local graduates still lack of communication skills especially in presenting and writing their tasks in languages other than the Malay language. In addition, the study discovered that local graduates were also weak in leadership skills such as in motivating and encouraging team members and that they were unable to lead their teams to achieve team objective. Also revealed was that the local graduates have been credulous in solving problems and in making wise conclusions and decisions pertinent to their job context.

Similar findings were recorded by Mohd Saad and Majid (2014), who revealed that employers prefer graduates who have (1) the ability to undertake problem identification, (2) the ability to formulate and think of solutions, (3) high standard of presentation and communication skills, and (4) the capacity to lead and work with team members. In another study, Ang (2015) analysed the viewpoints of public university graduates and employers in terms of the compatibility of skills required by the industry and job places. Interestingly, the study revealed a mismatched situation in which the graduates preferred generic elements that were considered as insignificant for their employment. The generic elements include commercial awareness/knowledge about the business, teamwork, and the ability to work cross-culturally. Nonetheless, employers from industry designated teamwork, computer literacy, and ability in written communication as three major skills required from potential employees. At the same time, Singh et al. (2013) investigated the employability skills graduates should possess upon leaving the university. Findings were obtained through the perceptions of instructors and employers. In terms of sampling, 124 employers and 126 academics and instructors were selected to ascertain graduates’ generic skills that should be enhanced before attending their graduation. Communication skills were found to be highly regarded by employers followed by integrity and professional ethics, and teamwork. Critical thinking and problem solving skills, which are highly regarded in the educational arena, were not deemed important by the employers within the industry.

**Significant and Aims of the Study**

Numerous studies have reported the successful implementation of graduates’ employability skills from the perspectives of the graduates, particularly after the revision of the employability policy (Abdullah et al., 2014; Audu et al., 2013). However, very few studies have referred employers or superiors’ perspectives on the perfection of graduates’ employability locally. One relevant study was conducted by Singh and Singh (2008), who studied the issue before the implementation of the revised policy. Thus, the present study was designed as an effort to investigate whether there is improvement on graduates’ employability after the implementation of the 2012’s revised policy from two major viewpoints: the employers as the stakeholder and the graduates who experienced the revised policy on employability. Towards these ends, we addressed two major research questions:

(a) Do HEIs graduates perceive that the implementation of the revised employability policy has enhanced their employability skills?

(b) Do employers perceive that the implementation of the revised employability policy have successfully developed graduates’ employability skills?

In answering the research questions above, a survey was administered to randomly selected graduates and employers to obtain their assessments on the enhancement of the generic/employability skills after the revised policy implementation in all HEIs. Sequentially, a few graduates and employers were
interviewed to obtain their views about the progress of graduates’ employability skills after the revised policy accomplishment.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were sent to 500 graduates who were randomly selected from public universities in Malaysia across disciplines such as engineering, social sciences, business, management and accounting, natural and pure sciences. They were contacted using emails and addresses obtained from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. The graduates were contacted to attain their feedbacks and evaluations of the instilling process of generics or employability within their academic courses. However, we only received 360 feedbacks from graduates who particularly asked to give their evaluations based on the generics/employability skills executed during their study period.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section contained two items on the graduates’ background: their gender and sectors in which they are currently working. The second section queried generic/employability/soft skills items and consisted of six items, which sought to gather information on the students’ soft/generic/employability skills that they have obtained while completing the university courses. This section required the graduates to provide their self-rating on their attainment of employability skills using a nominal scale from “1” (very poor) to “5” (excellent) on the instilling process of generics/employability within their academic courses. The six items on soft/generic/employability skills consisted of employability elements of ethics and integrity, leadership, critical thinking and problems solving, communication, teamwork, and passion for learning.

Questionnaires were also sent to 400 organisations currently receiving graduates from the public universities. The purpose was to obtain the proprietors’ feedback on the graduates’ employability skills. Towards this end, the lists and information of the 400 organisations were obtained from the Centre of Graduates and University’s Alumni which consisted of government offices, national and multinational companies, government-linked companies (GLC), and individual-owned companies. Employers of these organisations were given a questionnaire to seek their opinion whether the graduates have attained employability skills and qualities.

The questionnaire consisted of three major sections. The first section contained two items querying the sector in which the organization is serving. The second section sought to gather information on graduates’ employability skills. For this section, the employers were required to provide their ratings on the graduates’ employability skills, using a scale from “1” (very poor) to “5” (excellent). The six items on employability skills consisted of elements of ethics and integrity, leadership, critical thinking and problems solving, communication, teamwork, and passion for learning were assessed using a four-point Likert scale. The last section sought the employers’ recommendations for public universities’ leadership team to improve their graduates’ their soft/generic/employability skills.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Graduates’ and Employers’ Demographics

A total of 360 questionnaires were received from graduates who have completed their studies within their academic year of 2015/2016. Majority of the respondents (55.6 per cent, n = 200) are female and the remaining are male. In terms of employment, 31 graduates (8.6 per cent) are currently working with government and ministries, 41 (11.4 per cent) graduates are serving multinational companies, 69 (19.2 per cent) are staffs at the local-based companies, 84 (23.3 per cent) working with individual-based companies and quite a number of graduates (35.3 per cent, n = 127) are staffs of government-linked companies. The listing also shows that 8 graduates (2.2 per cent) are unemployed and self-employed. Quantitatively, we received 360 completed questionnaires from organisations that have received graduates. Out of the 360 organisations, 167 are national private companies (46.4 per cent), 111 are multinational companies (30.8 per cent), 43 are the government (11.9 per cent), 30 are government-linked companies (GLC) (8.3 per cent), and 9 are individual companies (2.5 per cent). Table 1 shows the graduates’ demographics information.
Reliability and Validity of Constructs

To assess the items’ reliability, the graduates’ questionnaire was tested using Cronbach alpha and the values on the standardised items were recorded at 0.88 for graduates and seven items were recorded to range from 0.827 to 0.909, which were considered as accepted values. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sample adequacy (0.907) and Bartlett’s test of Sphericity (chi square = 1,394, df = 15, p = 0.000) were conducted to assess the suitability of explanatory factor analysis requirement. In Table 2, the principal component analysis showed that the items are explained by one factor. The account of variance within the exploratory factor analysis is indicated at 69.659 per cent.

Table 1. Breakdown of the graduates and employers’ demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employers’ Demographics</th>
<th>Graduates’ Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sectors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multinational companies (international-based)</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private companies (local-based)</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual-based companies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government-linked companies (GLC)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After obtaining results from the principal component analysis, the phase of data analysis continued with identifying the process of constructs’ psychometrics using composite index and average variance extracted (AVE). The cut-off, conventional values have been suggested at 0.70 for the composite index (Fornell & Lacker, 1981) and 0.50 for the AVE index (Hair et al, 2010). The results revealed that the overall composite reliability index was at 0.82 (greater than 0.70). The AVE values of the graduates’ employability items were recorded at 0.831, which also exceeded the recommended cut-off values by Hair et al. (2010) at 0.50. Thus, it is assumed that all items representing graduates’ employability are valid and have internal consistency.

Table 2. Graduates’ items validity and reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eigenvalues</th>
<th>% Variance</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.173</td>
<td>69.659</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>.888</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical analysis and problem solving</td>
<td>.881</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>.862</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passion for learning</td>
<td>.815</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethics and integrity</td>
<td>.700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Later, the reliability of the employers’ questionnaire was tested using Cronbach’s alpha and the test recorded a value of 0.96 for all six items ranging from 0.957 to 0.959. Further, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sample adequacy (0.836) and Bartlett’s test of Sphericity (chi square = 1,347, df = 15, p = 0.000) were also conducted as a prerequisite of the explanatory factor analysis. Findings from the principal component analysis method indicated that six items within the employers’ questionnaire consisted of one factor. The account of variance within the exploratory factor analysis was indicated at 68.07 per cent (see Table 2).

As for the employers’ perceptions, psychometrics of the constructs was employed using the composite index and average variance extracted (AVE). The cut-off, conventional values are suggested to be 0.70 for the composite index (Fornell & Lacker, 1981) and 0.50 for the AVE index (Hair et al., 2010). The results revealed that the overall composite reliability index was slightly higher (0.84) than 0.70 as recommended by Hair et al. (2010), Fornell and Larcker (1981). The AVE values of the graduates’ employability items were then calculated at 0.825, which also exceeded the recommended cut-off values by Hair et al. (2010) at 0.50. These findings attest that all the items representing the graduates’ employability items are valid and have internal consistency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eigenvalues</th>
<th>% Variance</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.085</td>
<td>68.077</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critical analysis and problem solving</td>
<td>.813</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>.847</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passion for learning</td>
<td>.847</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethics and integrity</td>
<td>.841</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Employers’ reliability and validity**

**Measurement Models**

Subsequently, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed with a maximum likelihood approach to develop the measurement model of graduates’ six factors of employability. On the basis of the fit statistics recommended for measurement model, the accepted values were used to assess and validate the measurement model which indicated accepted fit statistics: Chi-square ($\chi^2$), normed fit index (NFI, $\geq 0.90$), comparative fit index (CFI, $\geq 0.90$), Turker–Lewin index (TLI, $\geq 0.90$), $\chi^2$/degrees of freedom (DF)($\geq 5.0$) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA, $\geq 0.08$). Through the analysis, the results of the graduates’ employability’s measurement model of the demonstrated an accepted fit statistics of: $\chi^2 = 23.8$, df = 9, CFI = 0.990, TLI = 0.985, NFI = 0.983, IFI = 0.990, RFI = 0.975, RMSEA = 0.068 and CMIN/DF = 2.644. Figure 2 illustrates the measurement model for graduates’ employability items.
Simultaneously, the measurement model for employers’ perceptions in assessing graduates’ employability skills was also executed. Analysis of the employers’ version of graduates’ employability measurement model also confirmed an accepted fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 130.1$, df = 9, CFI = 0.910, TLI = 0.850, NFI = 0.904, IFI = 0.910, RFI = 0.840, RMSEA = 0.194 and CMIN/DF = 14.460). In order to obtain better fit statistics, model modification was executed. The model was later re-estimated using errors covariance (e2 with e3; e3 with e5; e4 with e5 and e4 with e6) to obtain better value of modification indices. Later, it was found that the fit statistics were at better values: $\chi^2 = 20.2$, df = 5, CFI = 0.989, TLI = 0.966, NFI = 0.985, IFI = 0.989, RFI = 0.955, RMSEA = 0.072 and CMIN/DF = 4.407. These value exhibit a better measurement model. Figure 3 showed the modification measurement model of employers’ perceptions on graduates’ employability.

**Figure 2.** Measurement model of graduates’ employability items

**Figure 3.** Measurement model of employers’ perspectives on graduates’ employability items

**Graduates’ Self-Ratings on Their Employability Skills**

In table 4 below, it typically shows the breakdown of the graduates’ six employability skills. The results indicated the graduates self-rating of their employability skills after having completed their studies during the revised policy time frame. The table lists the mean scores for six employability skills, which show that the graduates believed that their leadership skill (M = 4.41) has much
improved compared to other skills rated. Pragmatically, the graduates also rated themselves with “good” and “excellent” in other three components: communication (M = 4.34), ethics and integrity (M = 4.33), and critical thinking and problem solving (M = 4.32). Nevertheless, they considered their passion for learning (M = 4.28) as the skill they least attained compared with other five employability skills.

The graduates also stated that the inculcation process within their academic weightage has improved their employability skills as majority of them rated “good” and “excellent” for communication (89.4 per cent; N = 322), ethics and integrity (90.9 per cent; N = 327), and critical thinking and problem solving (90 %; N = 324). They also noted that their passion for learning should have much to be improved with lowest mean scores and only 312 graduates (86 %) rated “good” and “excellent” for the skills. On the other hand, passion for learning skill was noted by most graduates as the skill they still lack hence require further enhancement (2 %). This is followed by communication (N = 4; 1.1 per cent), ethics and integrity (N = 4; 1.2 per cent), and critical thinking and problem solving (N = 3; 0.8 per cent) skills. As shown in Table 4, five graduates also felt they were “very poor” in terms of three aspects of employability: communication, passion for learning and ethics and integrity skills. These ratings were given despite having experienced and being inculcated within their academic weightage with HEIs.

As shown in Table 4, the graduates highly believed that they have attained much on leadership skills (M = 4.41) while completing their studies. This was followed by teamwork (M = 4.40). A majority of 91.7 per cent graduates (N = 330) selected teamwork as the most employability skills that they obtained after completing their studies followed by leadership skill (91.7 per cent; N = 330). As for teamwork, approximately 154 (42.8 per cent) graduates rated themselves with “good” and another 176 (48.9 per cent) graduates regarded their skill as “excellent”. Another 28 (21.9 per cent) graduates were quite moderate having rated themselves with “fair”. However, only 2 (0.6 %) graduates rated themselves as bad team members as they rated “poor” for their teamwork element. In terms of low ratings made by the graduates, another 28 (7.8 per cent) stated “fair” and two (0.6 per cent) selected “poor” based on their assessment on their teamwork skill after having completed their studies. On the graduates’ leadership skill assessment, quite a number of graduates rated themselves with high ratings: 149 (41.4 per cent) graduates selected “good” and another 181 (50.3 per cent) rated themselves as “excellent,” which deliberately showed that the graduates assumed that they have acquired much leadership skill after having completed their studies. As for the graduates’ lower ratings, approximately 27 (7.5 per cent) graduates selected “fair” for their leadership skill and only three (0.8 per cent) believed that their leadership skill was “poor.”

**Table 4. Graduates’ feedbacks on their employability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability Skills</th>
<th>Frequencies (%)</th>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>(1) 0.3%</td>
<td>(3) 0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and decision making</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3) 0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passion for learning</td>
<td>(2) 0.6%</td>
<td>(5) 1.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethics and Integrity</td>
<td>(2) 0.6%</td>
<td>(2) 0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) 0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3) 0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall mean scores</td>
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N = 360 graduates
A few graduates were approached and interviewed to obtain their views on their employability skills at the completion of their studies. In general, the recent graduates were happy according to their assessment of the beneficial aspect of the revised policy, and they even showed their satisfaction of the revised policy that they have experienced while studying at HEIs.

**Benefit to HEI’s Graduates**

Findings revealed that most graduates were happy with the employability programme implemented by the HEIs which they believed has much improved their non-academic skills. During the interview, four of them explained that the generic programs have built their self-confidence since they had to present their ideas in front of their classmates. They now have more confidence when asked to present their ideas in their workplace. As such, they were quite pleased with the execution of the generics programs in their HEIs and the programs were considered an asset to their preparation for their job placement. Graduate 1, 2, and 5 explained the positive impact of the programs on their generics skills.

*Most of the programs were conducted just to strengthen our confidence with many presentations. Thus, it builds up my confidence level as I knew that it is crucial for our job-placement since current employers are looking for those who can show their maturity and leadership.* (Graduate 2)

Another graduate also emphasised the beneficial aspect of the programme which had relevance to his future career as an engineer, where he has to lead a number of teams. Through this course, he was able to develop his leadership skills and also learn how to work in a team. He felt that the generic programs at the faculty level are able to improve graduates’ maturity and leadership skills.

*From this programme, I have learned to how lead my team and how to work and communicate with your team. As for me, this programme really helps me with my teamwork and leadership skills on how to execute the design plan and projects which much executed with collaborative efforts.*

Graduate 5 felt that the policy has improved the students’ generics skills as potential graduates of HEIs and the programme will benefit them in their workplace situations. Through the programme which emphasised generics skills, they learned how to lead their team and relevant communication skills, which they mostly obtained from a series of presentations in their classes together with their academics. Thus, they felt that the HEIs have not only taught them how to be a knowledgeable worker but also enabled them to lead their team.

*As for me, the generics classes help me to improve my skills at my workplace since I’m practicing all the skills that were taught into my workplace situation. During classes, I was taught on how to communicate with our staffs and on how to lead them into an effective team. I managed on improve my skills through academics programs which emphasised on how to be not just an engineer or teacher but also on how to lead your team through communication skills.*

**Students’ Satisfaction on the Generics Implementation**

The graduates posited that they were quite satisfied with the implementation of the generics alongside the academic subjects that were taught in the faculty. They also suggested that the generics be inculcated within their academic subjects because the incorporation will benefit graduates’ employability skills. In addition, they also suggest that the implementation of the generics be improved within the academic subjects. As Graduate 1 revealed,

*I do think that this implementation is wise to improve graduates’ generic skills and I’m quite happy. However, there is one issue which I think is essential in improving the implementation system. Most lecturers are using Malay during classes and I think the faculty should emphasise the usage of English which is crucial for our international scenes and networks and also our employment.*

The findings conclude that the graduates were generally satisfied with the development of their employability skills after the revising phase of the employability policy alongside their academic and
technical knowledge. The incorporation was through to have prepared them as workforce for potential job markets and employment prospects.

**Employers’ Ratings on Graduates’ Employability**

Relatively, the employers provided much lower ratings scale in assessing the graduates’ employability skills. In four employability skills, the employers appraised with lower ratings in frequencies and mean scores of all four elements of employability skills. In communication skill, almost half of the employers (n = 228, 68.8 per cent) rated graduates with “good” rating and another small portion (n = 31, 8.6 %) marked “excellent” for graduates’ communication skill. A total of 94 (26.1 per cent) employers indicated that graduates’ communication skill are at “fair” and 7 (1.9 per cent) employers believed that HEI graduates’ communication skills are at the “poor” level. Other skills—critical thinking and decision making—were noted as the least employability skills on the basis of the mean scores compared with other three employability skills.

In Table 5, data shows that a total of 198 employers (55.3 per cent) indicated that graduate’ skills are “good” and “excellent”. Another half of the employers (40.6 per cent, n = 146) mentioned that graduates’ critical thinking and decision making skills are “fair” and another 16 employers (4.5 per cent) rated the skills as “poor” or “very poor”. As shown from the table, 210 employers (58.3 per cent) also stated that graduates’ skill on passion for learning are mainly “good” and a small number (n = 57, 15.8 per cent) assumed that graduates’ passion for learning are “excellent”. A total of 83 employers (23.1 per cent) believed that graduates’ passion for learning skill are mainly “fair” and only 10 employers (2.7 per cent) believed that graduates’ passion for learning skill are “poor” or “very poor”. Overall, the employers’ perceptions on graduates’ ethics and integrity skill were encouraging and had similar pattern with other three employability skills, and ethics and integrity skill recorded the highest mean scores among other employability skills.

A majority of 220 employers (61.1 per cent) acknowledged on graduates’ ethics and integrity skill and another 61 (16.9 per cent) believed that graduates’ ethics and integrity skill is “excellent”. In addition, 76 (21.1 per cent) employers rated graduates’ level of ethics and integrity as “fair” and only four employers (1.2 per cent) believed that graduates have problems with their ethics and integrity values. Table 5 attests that there was not much difference between the employers and graduates’ evaluations on teamwork; the employers also believed that graduates have high employability abilities on teamwork. A total of 218 (60.6 per cent) employers stated that graduates are “good” in terms of teamwork skill.

Another 57 (15.8 per cent) employers valued graduates as having “excellent” teamwork skill and 79 (21.9 per cent) believed that graduates have much upgrading on their teamwork skill. The employers selected “fair” for graduates’ teamwork skill and another 6 employers (1.7 per cent) stated that the graduates were “poor” in their teamwork skill. These findings suggest that it was the employers who assumed that the graduates were acknowledged for their high capabilities as good team member who respect their colleagues through good interaction with their counterparts.

In terms of graduates’ leadership skill, the employers were generally disapproving: only 21 (5.8 per cent) employers chose the “excellent” and another 145 (40.3 per cent) selected “good”. Almost half of employers (49.4 per cent, n = 178) believed that the graduates were “fair” in their leadership skills and 13 (3.6 %) believed the graduates were “poor”. In fact, 3 employers (0.8 per cent) believed that the graduates were “very poor” for their leadership skill. These findings suggest that majority of the employers believed that there is much to be improved on graduates’ leadership capabilities such as the latter’s ability as a team leader and the capability to motivate teams members.
To support our quantitative data, we approached a few employers to obtain their views on the graduates’ employability quality especially on the weaknesses that can be improved. In particular, we asked the employers on the graduates’ weaknesses elements that necessitate progress especially in preparing them for their potential job placement. In general, two major aspects of graduates’ employability skills require more improvement, and the employers labeled as leadership and critical thinking and decision making skills as the required skills.

**Leadership Skills**

During the interviews, majority of the employers pointed out the lack of leadership skills among graduates. A few aspects require further development in order to prepare graduates for their job-market placements. Employer 1 particularly stressed on the graduates’ leadership quality that needs to be improved in concocting them as a potential employees for any organisation in the private or government sector:

*I think that graduates have to prepare themselves with some leadership skills in terms of leading their team which to me that they lack of. I afraid that some of the graduates, they lack of team leadership and I do think that they are prefer to be alone during their students’ days which to me should undertake by all HEIs.*

In supporting the above comment, Employer 2 also highlighted the lacking of graduates’ employability skills especially in leadership. He particularly commented on the graduates’ lack of skill in motivating team members and colleagues. He emphasised that to be a good leader, a graduate should know how to motivate team members and colleagues for the benefits of the organisation:

*Some graduates were lack of motivation in motivating their team members and colleagues. As a leader even for a small group, you should know on how to motivate your team members especially when they were ‘down’ which required much encouragement and psychological supports from you as leader. These are skills that most graduates lack of since most of them too much focusing on their study weightage.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability Skills</th>
<th>Frequencies (%)</th>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(7) 1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and decision making</td>
<td>(2) 0.6%</td>
<td>(14) 3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion for learning</td>
<td>(3) 0.8%</td>
<td>(7) 1.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethics and Integrity</td>
<td>(3) 0.8%</td>
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Majority of the employers highlighted the importance of being a team member. This refers to the graduates' communication or interpersonal skills which are required for them to have good and positive relationship with colleagues and to function well as a team member.

In selecting candidate, we prefer candidate who able to work with others staffs. In addition, we also look for candidate who has a good presentation and those able to do their presentation well are considered as a well-prepared person. These are skills that some graduates lack of when applying for any post.

Critical Thinking and Decision Making Skills
The employers requested graduates’ critical thinking skills which they considered essential for their organisations. They have exercised stringent evaluations in selecting potential employees and majority of them believed that the lack of graduates’ ability to think out of the box indicates the graduates’ inability to think unconventionally or to develop a new insight especially in solving organisation-related problems. The employers also highlighted on graduates’ creativity and innovative elements which are lacking. Employer 5 shared his experience:

I think that some graduates weren’t that creative enough in solving problems and in fact some of them were quite difficult to think unconventionally. Most of them were inability to prioritise their given tasks, uncritical and even using some traditional ways in solving problems through the autarchic thinking which blocked them from being critical. I do think that this aspect should on taken into account by leadership of HEIs since we lack of graduates with unconventional thinking skills.

The employers also discussed graduates’ lack analytical thinking skills which are related to graduates’ competencies in problems analysis in a critical situation. In the employment sector, employers typically insist that their potential employee have high problem-solving skill in order to present solutions in critical situations. To the employers, graduates who are competent in problem analysis demonstrate the credential to be selected as employers’ potential candidature in their organisations. Employer 4 shared his experience in selecting graduates for his organisation:

Graduates still faced difficulty when it comes to solving problem phase during our selection process. Most of graduates that went for the interview were unable to come out with wise decisions when they asked to come out with solution during a critical situation. Most of them still thinking using the conventional way and rigidly attached to their academic knowledge. Actually, we are looking for graduates who have more than the academic qualification which able to bring our organisation ahead with their problem solving and critical thinking skills.

To conclude, majority of the employers who are HEIs stakeholders remarked positively on graduates’ employability progress. They considered the graduates’ skills to be have tremendously improved after the execution of the revised policy in 2012. They also pointed out on a few skills that have yet to improve which are the leadership and critical thinking and decision-making skills. These skill are nevertheless the pertinent elements to most employers who demand graduates to be highly competence in leadership and critical as potential employees.

Differences between Employers and Graduates Perceptions
To further investigate employability skills, a t-test was conducted on 720 samples which incorporated 360 employers and another 360 graduates related to graduates’ improvement in employability skills. Table 6 shows the responses from both the employers and graduates.

Results from the t-test indicated that all six elements of employability skills noted significant differences between employers’ with graduates’ perceptions on employability skills acquired after the revised policy phase in HEIs. The employers provided the least ratings and much lower mean scores in all six elements of graduates’ employability compared to the graduates’ self-ratings.
In Table 6, the mean differences are significant for all employability skills, but leadership skills (MD = 0.92, \( t = 8.170, \text{Sig} = 0.000 \)), followed by critical thinking and decision making skills (MD = 0.79, \( t = 7.093, \text{Sig} = 0.000 \)) and communication skills (MD = 0.56, \( t = 5.056, \text{Sig} = 0.000 \)) recorded higher values of differences than those received for other three elements of employability skills. On the contrary, the least significance difference was recorded for ethics and integrity skills (MD = 0.40, \( t = 4.183, \text{Sig} = 0.000 \)). These differences concluded that the graduates believed that the revised policy on their employability has achieved the objective to enhance their generic intellectuality and to prepare them for the job-market placement. The employers, on the contrary, assumed that HEIs have exercised many efforts to enhance graduates’ generics skills especially in leadership and critical thinking, which indicates the least improvement on graduates’ employability.

**DISCUSSION**

In general, the graduates were quite pragmatic and positive that they have improved their employability skills after having completed their studies at HEIs. Their perceptions were derived from their experiences with the courses offered which have accentuated and inculcated employability skills within their academic weightage. Thus, their self-valuation towards the development of their employability skills was generally positive; they believed that they have improved their employability skills entreated by their employers. Nevertheless, there were still some graduates who believed that they required further expansion on their employability skills in order to be potential employees for the job market.

The graduates were also generally happy with the incorporation process of generics elements within the academic subjects. They felt that the incorporation has facilitated the development of their employability skills. To them, their generic skills have been successfully inculcated with the dual dispositions of technical knowledge, a combination required by employers when selecting future potential workers. They revealed that the instilling processes after the revising policy have relatively improved their employability qualities, such as their confidence level, maturity, and their leadership skills, all considered to be assets for job placements. Through the implementation of the revised policy, they also learned how to effectively lead their teams; they received opportunity to practice how to communicate with their staff, which has improved their communication and leadership abilities, and they executed their strategic design plan through collaborative efforts. Most of the graduates were generally satisfied with the revised policy implementation and some of them believed that the programme should continue as part of the positive efforts to improve graduates’ employability skills.

In contrast, the employers interviewed gave low ratings for the graduates’ employability skills. The employers, who were the substantial parties receiving graduates as their workforces, provided much noteworthy findings that are much relevant towards improving graduates’ marketability and
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employment (Zubaidah & Rugayah, 2008). In particular, the employers rated low ratings for two skills: the leadership skills, and critical thinking and decision making skills. The lack of leadership competencies among graduates was stressed as the persisting factor that has caused some graduates to face difficulties in securing employment after completing their studies. In the interviews, the employers also kept highlighting that leadership skill is an indispensable skill required from all graduates who would be leading some tasks or projects and team members. The employers were generally unhappy with the improvement on graduates’ leadership skills even after the policy on graduates’ employability was revised.

The employers also highlighted graduates’ flaws in leadership skills including the lack of capacity in motivating team members and colleagues. They believed that communication skills are the skills least grasped by graduates despite employers preferring good communication skills in order for the graduates to connect well with the organisation’s staff. These results are consistent with those of Ismail et al. (2011), Humburg et al. (2013), Zubaidah and Rugayah (2008), all of who have stressed on employers’ inclination towards graduates who have good communication skills. Findings from employers’ assessment also pointed that HEIs’ graduates lack critical thinking and decision making skills even after the implementation of the revised policy. Majority of the employers believed that most of the graduates have yet to acquire the ability to think unconventionally or develop new insights especially in solving some problems related to organisations. These employers anticipated that graduates are not adequately creative in solving problems; the graduates even face many difficulties in prioritising their given tasks, are uncritical, and even use some traditional ways to solve problems through the autarchic thinking, which blocks them from being a critical employee.

Local researchers including Abdul Hamid and Mohamad (2014) believe that the lack of leadership among graduates originates from HEIs’ learning approach when too many concentrations were placed on the academics and theoretical knowledge and this would definitely provide the least time frame for graduates to practice their leadership skills. In addition, employers have reported that graduates still lack on the leadership skill despite the skill being accustomed as an element that essentially emphasised by most HEIs. Accordingly, HEIs should exercise extensive roles as “training ground” not only to provide the nation’s future leaders (McNaboe, 2011; Haber, 2011) but also to produce aspiring successful leaders for the nation’s growths. Thus, HEIs should treated leadership as a skill mandatory for potential HEIs graduates and not limited or taught to business and management students. It is assumed that graduates of HEIs would obtain some practical and internship experiences on their experiential learning based on the actual settings, which exposed them to their employment context. This will render them to the actual settings of the workplace. This suggestion has been much forwarded by previous local and international researchers as a positive initiative in developing and preparing graduates’ employability skills for their job placement (Humburg et al., 2013).

The employers and graduates seemed to have contradictory views on the improvement process of graduates’ employability skills. The inferential t-test confirmed that six elements of graduates’ employability showed significance differences with leadership skill and critical thinking and decision making skills indicating much higher degree of differences between the two ratings. This implies that the employers provided low ratings on graduates’ employability skills despite the implementation of the revised policy. They particularly believed that much perfection should be enhanced by the Ministry of Higher Education and the educational authorities in order to upgrade the employability skills of HEIs graduates and to decrease graduates’ unemployment rates.

The findings of this study have much vital practical implications to the HEIs management particularly in improving their potential graduates’ employability and in decreasing the graduates’ employment mismatch issue. The implications also include in preparing the graduates for job-market placement as future workers for their potential employees. First, the HEIs’ management should enhance more roles of practicality and internship within the academic weightage of graduates during their studies. Through practical and internship, graduates are able to integrate their theoretical knowledge into their usage or practical applications (Washer, 2015). At the same time, potential graduates are able to grasp the real experiences and culture of the job context and attain valuable applied proficiencies. Employers are also able to teach, guide, and assess graduates’ capacity and skills. Previous studies (Humburg et al.,

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2013; Mason et al, 2011) have suggested that HEIs should introduce or enhance the internship or industrial practical mode to strengthen and equip potential graduates in fulfilling employers’ definitions of having work experiences and have roles as essential criteria for potential employers in selecting their future employees. Second, more programmes on leadership enhancement should be conducted by the HEIs’ leadership to prepare graduates with more leadership competencies because potential graduates will be exposed to the practicality of leading their teams and to motivating and encouraging their teams toward achieving organisation objectives. Third, it is suggested that all HEIs enhance their lecturing approach through a case study experience that highly emphasises on the method of solving problems and decision making skills. The aim is to prepare potential graduates with more skills, exposure, and experiences on how to solve problem in critical situations. These graduates will be assigned the skills in leading their team in achieving mission and objective. Fourth, the HEI’s leadership should undertake some collaborative agreements with leading companies and expatriates in an effort to increase the numbers of graduates employed. Through these mutual and bilateral connections, the HEI’s leadership is able to cater to their graduates’ employability skills based on the needs of the companies and the job market. Lastly, the HEIs alumnus should also play their vital roles because some benefits are attainable from the alumni who are currently corporate leaders. Through this way, the HEI is able to align the needs of the industry employability by exchanging information between the HEI’s leadership and the alumni, particularly through series of informal meetings and discussions. The information provided by the alumni on the current content of all academic courses can suggest some improvements requested by the industry.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

The findings of this study are interpreted with a few limitations. First, only 360 graduates were contacted. Thus, including graduates from private HEIs can also yield more patterns and clearer understanding on the issue. Second, only 360 employers were sampled for this study and increasing the number of respondents to include those from various sectors and throughout the country would provide more in-depth understanding of the issue.

The findings also suggest the following directions for future studies towards understanding the employability issue of HEIs graduates: (a) More samples from both parties should be included in order to generalise the findings to the overall context of Malaysia, (b) a longitudinal study is suggested to include various types of graduates such as those who recently graduated, those who graduated in the past three to five years, and those who graduated more than five years ago, (c) The perceptions of HEIs’ academics can also be employed because most of them are the executioners of the revised policy on graduates’ employability. Thus, their perceptions are considered vital in understanding the reasons some potential graduates lack employability skills upon leaving HEIs. In this sense, Yoong et al. (2016) argue that it is quite discouraging to note that policy makers have been disregarding the role of teachers, instructors, and academics in determining future graduates employable. Sin and Amaral (2016) also contend that academics’ engagement with employability and academics’ acceptance and involvement of the employability policy have been little examined in the context of graduates’ employability, (d) More in-depth qualitative or quantitative study should be conducted to provide a much clearer picture of the graduates’ employability in the efforts to decline the mismatched issue on employability from various approaches, (e) Quantitatively, another variable should be added such as graduates’ satisfaction towards the revised policy. This can facilitate the understanding of whether the country’s graduates are satisfied with the revised policy in order to eliminate the underemployment issue among HEIs graduates.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into essential graduates’ employability after the revised policy on graduates’ employability was officially implemented by all HEIs in 2012. The findings suggest that the local graduates’ have achieved majority of the six elements studied in their employability but employers believed that further developments of leadership skill and critical thinking and decision making skill should be initiated by the ministry and educational authorities. The purpose is to prepare potential graduates with more skills required by the industry. A few suggestions were forwarded with regards to developing graduates’ employability skills.
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