

Academics' Concern on Graduate Employability amidst the Pandemic

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Abstract: This article was written as part of a bigger research project on developing a Graduate Employability (GE) Teaching Model which received university funding. Recent years have seen a growing literature on GE. The need for soft skills training is seen as parallel with the need to enhance employability skills. The changing work landscape due to the VUCA (volatile, uncertainty, complex and ambiguous) world suggests a higher demand for the concerns on graduate employability and employability skills to be addressed. Needless to say, the pandemic brought with it a force that challenged the norm in how higher education is provided and brought an amplified concern on how GE is addressed during the pandemic. As part of the bigger data collection procedure, a focus group interview based on a semi-structured interview protocol was conducted as an attempt to uncover how academics train their students' GE skills. The investigation rested on several key issues; their approach in developing GE skills, the critical issues faced while developing the GE skills and the support they require in developing GE skills among their students. At the onset of the study, the context of the pandemic guided the direction of the data collection and analysis. The report from this small-scale study provided initial findings that could be referred to as the research progressed into further data collection via the mixed method research design. The qualitative data from the interview was analysed based on themes and sub-themes as guided by the research questions and the interpretations were supported by relevant literature. Interesting findings were yielded from the analysis suggesting potential preliminary findings that could be referred to in an attempt to develop a teaching model for GE. Besides the policy makers and curriculum developers, future researchers may find this article as an important reference in their work.

Keywords: Graduate Employability Skills, Teaching Model, Higher Education, pandemic Covid-19

1. Introduction

The World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2020 provided a report that highlights the importance of Industry Revolution 4.0 (IR4.0) and the relevance of the soft skills as important competencies deemed vital by many industries. The recent report entitled 'The Future of Jobs' by WEF (2020) showed a slight change in the soft skills and their order of importance. Needless to say, WEF (ibid.) emphasized on the trending

soft skills expected by industries by 2025. As a result, the last few years have seen a growing literature on the importance of soft skills, the training of skills and how they are related to Graduate Employability (GE) aside the emerging automation, robotics, cloud computing and artificial intelligence in IR4.0. Following the demands of Industry Revolution 4.0 (IR4.0), much has also been said about the importance of soft skills training to future graduates. The emphasis given to curriculum development included the inclusion of IR4.0 elements in the syllabus aside from an obvious focus on student-centred teaching and learning delivery system.

Nonetheless, past research conducted has confirmed plenty more that needs to be addressed in ensuring the development of GE skills. Ilhaamie, Rosmawani, and Yusmini (2018) who conducted a research on Malaysian graduates discovered that most graduates lack employability skills, which were strongly associated with the soft skills much demanded by the industries. Malaysian education has long referred to the 'Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)' framework in addressing instructors' competencies. Several research conducted have indicated similar issue concerning the need for continuous training for instructors in developing their competencies in using technology to train soft skills to their students (Hasniza and Tengku Faekah, 2016; Nur Filzah, 2016; Nor'ain and Noor Zarinawaty, 2014; Junnaina and Hazri, 2012).

A survey conducted by TalentCorp (2020) also yielded an alarming set of findings particularly on the unemployment rate of the Malaysian graduates. MOHE has always been proactive in preparing the relevant platforms to promote the development of graduate employability. The universities have also complemented government's initiatives with their signature GE programmes. However, one question remains: are the academics providing instructions complementing the GE initiatives? Thus, the present study was conducted to answer the following research questions;

1. How do academics develop their GE in their teaching?
2. What are the academics' critical issues in developing GE?
3. What are the support needed by academics to develop GE?
4. What are some of the GE issues during post COVID19?

2. Literature Review

In 2015, the Malaysian government introduced the latest policy in higher education through the National Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 which emphasizes 10 shifts in transforming higher education institutes to be as competitive as the rest of the world. The first shift of the blueprint, Shift 1: Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates, focuses on higher learning institutes' ability to develop quality graduates who are holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced in their outlook on life. Despite the Ministry's efforts to produce holistic and employable graduates, the employability trend has remained stagnant. According to Leo (2019), graduate employability (GE) has fluctuated from the year 2006 to 2019. The prospects of graduates gaining a job in the next year or two is very much slim. Thus, graduates depend on academics to ensure enough knowledge and experiences are provided in the teaching and learning process to achieve learning outcomes that are directed to GE development. Higher education institutions are without a doubt the 'primary factory' in teaching students for current and future jobs.

According to the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, employment is defined as the potential to secure a job at a workplace, while employability is defined as the potential to secure, keep, and advance in a specific position at a workplace. Based on these definitions, it is safe to conclude that employability requires a set of skills that would allow individuals to be employed, maintain being employed and even become self-employed and create new jobs. According to Jackson and Wilton (2016), employability can be conceptualized as the skills and personal attributes that industries perceive as necessary for graduates to have to secure employment. Some of the skills are generic (e.g., teamwork, organizational, communication) and discipline-specific (e.g., the skills and knowledge relevant to engineering, law or social work), as well as personal attributes (e.g., self-confidence, resilience, discipline).

In Malaysia, more emphasis has been put on graduates acquiring soft skills to guarantee employment. Aida, Norailis and Rozaini (2015) argue that soft skill is a set of skills that referred to their personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social manners that assure their capability to be a part of the working world. They categorize the skills into basic (reading, writing, listening, oral communication, basic mathematics and science), higher-order thinking (learning, reasoning, creativity, decision making, problem-solving) and individual traits (teamwork, punctuality, efficiency, self-directed, good attitude, well groom, cooperative, self-motivated and self-management, responsibility, self-confidence, self-control, social skills, honesty, integrity, adaptability and flexibility). Nevertheless, it is important to note that GE skills vary depending on perspectives, economic needs and even courses learned in universities. In today's globalized and competitive climate of the working world, employers will continue to seek better graduates with skills that are valued for money.

In a survey done by Bennet et al (2016), it was discovered that 63 per cent of the students reported that they depended on their lecturers to provide them with up-to-date information on the industry and careers. It was also discovered that the students relied on their lecturers nearly twice as much as they did on other sources. Although academics' main focus is to teach, they too face various challenges in achieving their daily teaching goals. According to Bennett (2019), academics resist including GE in their teaching and learning process due to reasons such as the lack of preparation time, expertise and resources. Bennett (ibid.) also adds that employability skills are seen as less important compared to the subject matter. In general, it is unwise to fully rely on academics to have all the understanding of the discipline, career education and related industry. As our education system still prioritises tests and examinations as the medium for assessment, attention remains on the teaching of theory. As a result, students can only acquire the theoretical aspect of the knowledge but in return, lack professionalism and employability skills. For some academics, the ideal learning environment is also unachievable due to the lack of instructional strategies knowledge as they find it hard to create one that suits the teaching of employability skills such as allowing students to practice the skills through problem-solving or case study.

The recent outbreak of the COVID-19 has further altered the outlook of employability among graduates. A major setback faced by an aspiring group of graduates this past two years is to find and be offered a job regardless of whether it pertains to their bachelor degrees or otherwise. As the pandemic is showing no sign of receding, the education sector will continue to face many challenges ranging from graduates' inability to get a job to how academics can respond to issues faced during virtual classrooms or online learning. New aspects such as the teaching of entrepreneurial skills for instance are now considered highly to ensure graduates can find ways to stand on their own feet despite not being employed by any company. This is in line with the recent report made by the World Economic Forum (2020) on the emerging jobs of tomorrow post-COVID-19 that emphasises entrepreneurship. This research is a testament to the current situation of GE and what can be done to improve it based on the perspectives of two academicians. The following diagram illustrates the conceptual framework derived from the literature review as discussed above.

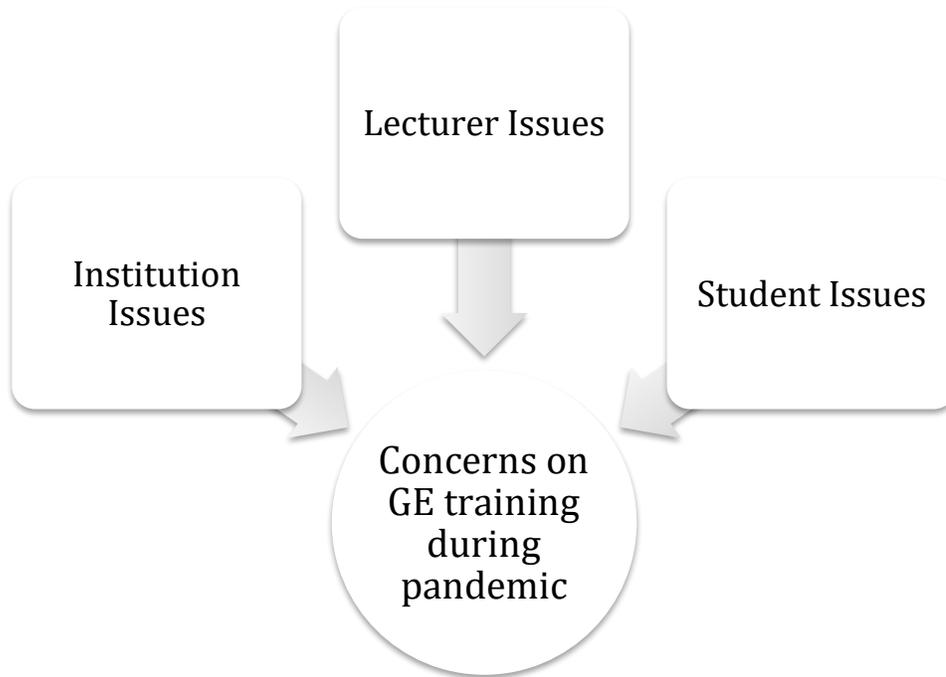


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

Research Design

As this study is a smaller part of a bigger research, a qualitative research design was opted in determining the data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, the set of research questions which aimed at understanding the academics' experiences in training GE during the pandemic further confirmed the appropriateness of the qualitative research design.

Participants

Two senior academics took part in the study. Both participants had agreed to participate upon being briefed about the research purpose and procedure. Coincidentally, both participants are female academics who have taught between 10 and 15 years; one having completed her doctoral degree while the other was finishing hers. Both academics had the experience of administrative posts which enabled them to be directly involved in the curriculum development and teaching and learning monitoring in the faculty. The background is an added advantage to the present study as the two participants were well-versed with the GE context and teaching and learning in higher education.

Instrument

A descriptive and narrative research data was identified as most suitable to answer the research questions. Hence, a semi-structured interview was conducted on the two academics serving in the same faculty in one of the public universities. The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions which were prepared at the onset of the study based on relevant literature review.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, member-checks and inter-rater checks were done (Yin, 2014). In member-checks, the participants were asked to confirm the researcher's interpretation of their interview feedback. This was done with each participant after her respective interview session. The inter-rater check was done at the final stage of data analysis when a colleague of the research

team was asked to confirm her agreement with the team's final data analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data from the semi-structured interview was analyzed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do academics develop their GE in their teaching?
2. What are the academics' critical issues in developing GE?
3. What are the support needed by academics to develop GE?
4. What are some of the GE issues during post COVID19?

Relevant excerpts from the data are analysed and interpreted to gain understanding in answering the research questions.

GE Development in Teaching

Graduate employability, as the term suggests, looks into the graduates' ability to be employed upon graduation. Given this fact, it is pertinent to understand how academics at the university develop this notion in their teaching as the university is normally the final checkpoint before they go into the working world. In this research, this was asked to the participants, who are academicians training future teachers at a public university in Malaysia. One of the participants trains future English teachers (Puan S) and the other trains future physical health education teachers (Dr A).

For these academicians, their focus when delivering their lectures would always be on the subject matter of the courses that they teach. GE skills are embedded in their teaching, and it is only mentioned when the need arises for them to do so.

"...when we plan our lessons, we tend to focus more on the subject matter. But along the way, I believe lecturers should inform students why is this important? How it is important?"
Puan S.

"Usually in my field, it's not only about the curriculum, but we emphasize more on their certifications, skills certification. So they need to- I always encourage them to register, pick up skills courses so that these will help them in the future."
Dr. A

This is in line with the notion that employability skills are not seen as an important aspect compared to the subject matter in a particular curriculum due to its "soft" skills definition (Bennett, 2019). Although they do not directly focus on GE in their teaching, both academicians demonstrated the need for academicians to be aware of what the industry needs before they could embed GE skills in their lessons, as mentioned in the excerpts below:

"Because we can see, this is what they (the industry) are looking for."
Dr. A

Dr A further demonstrated that she is aware of what the industry wants:

"Usually during the interview for posting, for those yang sekolah lah kan (going to school), they (the school) will ask this, what do you have? What are the extra strength that you have to be compared to the other graduate?"
A

Because she is aware of what the industry expects from future graduates, she often persuades and encourages students to equip themselves with the skills expected by the industry. These findings concur

with the findings conducted by Akter (2020) who discovered that often university lecturers had issues in addressing GE and the training of GE traits in the subject they taught.

Duignan et. al (2019) reported that communication, critical thinking and self-management skills are the most dominant employability skills observed during the teaching and learning process. When asked whether they include these skills in their teaching, Pn. S felt that these skills are not directly taught, but instead weaved into the design of the course when students complete their assignments and tasks given. She said,

“I think when we do that (setting deadlines), we’re trying to promote, the skills of self-regulation, or self- or management of time, management of self, which obviously it’s not something that we can teach because all the subject matter is different.” Pn. S

She went on further by mentioning that,

“But it’s not something that I can talk about all the time (self-regulation and management).” Pn. S

However, with regards to the critical thinking skills, both academics felt that this could be taught and focused on with the incorporation of HOTS questions in the assignments and tasks. Tyas, Nurkamto, Marmanto & Laksani (2019) concur that students will be able to think critically as they are given more HOTS-based activities. Dr. A also reiterated that most rubrics used to assess the students include these skills as part of the assessment.

In essence, the findings from the interviews suggest that the development of GE skills in teaching at the university level is not necessarily done explicitly but instead, these skills are embedded in how the course is designed and taught by the lecturers. Another finding that is note-worthy in GE development in teaching is the academics’ awareness of the current needs of the industry. If an academic is unaware of what the industry needs, it may have an impact on how an academic actually develops GE in their teaching. Okolie, Igwe, Nwosu, Eneje and Mlanga (2020) emphasise that educators with lack of industry experience will contribute to the failure in teaching employability skills

Academics’ Critical Issues in Developing GE

The second research question for this paper deals with critical issues that academics face in developing GE in their teaching. Although both Puan S and Dr. A mentioned that they do not explicitly teach GE skills in their courses, it is in the embedding of GE skills that these academics find difficulties with. Two main issues that implored the GE development revolve around the attitude of the students and the university policy.

Both academics seem to agree that one of the biggest challenges that they face when they want to develop GE in their teaching lies in the students’ attitudes. They felt that the newer generation of students are less resilient and less driven than previous students that they have taught. For example, Puan S began by mentioning the lack of resourcing for information, which was followed by her insight on why this is so, attributing it to the massive use of social media in today’s generation. According to Abaleta, Centaza and Calimlim (2004, as cited in Asif-Ur-Rahman, Junayed & Masoom, 2015) support the statement as they too found that students who spend a lot of time browsing social media platforms will study less and achieve lower grades. She also shared how she felt there are more distractions for the students these days when it comes to information search on the internet:

“Also the fact that the generation now is they’re more on technology, it’s more for entertainment purposes rather than for knowledge purposes. When you ask them to research, look for informaton to support their opinions, they find that very difficult. They don’t know how to do it.”

Puan S

“There’re probably more distractions for them. We didn’t have social media back then as how it is right now.”

Puan S

Other than lack of resilience in information sourcing, another issue that Dr. A’s personal experience was how students have become less driven over the years. She recalled how previously students would willingly attend coaching courses that were needed for the students’ GE. However, in recent years, students are becoming more reluctant in attending such courses, up to the point where they tried negotiating their way out from such courses:

“...I could see the trend (over the years). Past students would just accept and go to the courses. We ask them to do they will do, but these..lately these students negotiate more and start to compare why this is asked of them.”

Dr. A

Dr. A went on by saying that despite telling the students that this is part of their GE requirement by most employers, students still do not feel the need to attend those courses:

“Sometimes they don’t feel like attending, like it is not important, despite us trying to convince them to do so.”

Dr. A

While students were seen as unmotivated or less driven, another possible cause is their anxiety and stress as claimed by Chong and Thi (2020) who discovered similar findings in their research.

Another pertinent issue in developing GE as highlighted by the two academics in this research is the university policy. There appears to be a gap between how the university treats students versus how employers would treat their employees. The university is the last pitstop for students before they embark on their work life. Hence, understandably, university should be the training ground to prepare these students for the workplace. However, many university policies are observed to be too student-oriented, which is not what the workplace is going to be about. As agreed by Kostal, Kuncel and Sackett (2016), over pleasing students in deadlines and assignments will cause grade inflation which ultimately pushes them to misunderstand the reality of the working world, which is devoid of leniency. Lecturers, as the law-abiding employees, have no choice but to adhere to the implemented policies.

The first example on this would be in terms of the deadlines set for the students for the courses that they are sitting in a semester, as explained by Puan S:

“For example, we have due dates for different courses, and some of these new dates will be back-to-back...now we have students saying we can’t because we have this assignment dues on Monday, so we can’t do...and so on and so forth..it doesn’t help that the management takes it a bit too far where they say, okay, one week only one assignment can be due, or like..the deadlines should not be too close..you’re like putting them in a comfort zone. I think that’s why the industry now are talking a lot about how graduates just can’t handle the stress,

because they didn't have that when they were in university."

Puan S

The two academics interviewed for this research also has indicated that they try to incorporate these skills in the management of their courses. However, there seems to be a mismatch between the literature and what is currently being practiced at the university. When policies that are too student-oriented is implemented, students are not practicing self management skills, but instead, the university can be perceived as doing the self-management for the students. This in turn will not do the students any good in terms of preparing them for the workplace environment, where it is more of sink-or-swim environment. The concerns shared by the research participants seem to confirm an earlier finding that stated the importance of relevant soft skills such as self-management and positive attitude among the university students (Ma'dan, Ismail and Daud, 2020).

Support Needed to Develop GE

The third research question asked the academics on the support needed by academics in developing GE among the students. The core findings in the interview data suggests that lecturers should attend courses in order to upskill their knowledge on GE. The perspective offered by these two academics suggest that both lecturers and the faculty play an equally important role in identifying the courses needed by the lecturers.

From Puan S' point of view, lecturers should first understand what is it that they do not have. From there, they can then identify the courses that they could attend to increase their understanding of skills required in the field:

"..first of all, you have to make sure that they (the lecturers) understand what is it that you don't have. It's too bad you don't have this so we have to give you this."

Puan S.

Sharing similar views, Dr. A added that she herself looks forward to attend courses that will enable her to understand the GE skills needed by her students:

"Like me, I need to know and sit for courses on becoming an aerobic instructor, because I know this will help my students and helps me with the courses that I teach which will in turn help my students in the future."

Dr. A

In identifying what skills do the lecturers need, Puan S also felt that the faculty needs to play a more active role. The faculties must be aware of the GE requirements for their students. Once this is established, then faculties must examine whether the lecturers are able to impart these requirements to the students. In cases where they are not able to do so, faculties should identify the necessary training that can help the lecturers to develop these skills:

" I think while the lecturers should be allowed to decide what they want, the management needs to know, okay as a faculty, what are the skills that we have to impart to the students. In order to do that, these lecturers must have these skills. If they do not have such skills, then they must be sent for the relevant courses."

Puan S.

From these findings, courses are deemed to be helpful for the academics to better develop GE in their teaching and to prepare the students for the working world.

GE Issues post-COVID19

The final research question explored GE issues post-COVID19. Three major findings were drawn to help answer the research question with regards to skills attainment among future graduates. Firstly, survival skills especially in terms of technology usage has thrived among the students as exemplified by Dr A:

“I think (the students) are more advanced than us in terms of technology, ICT area to the point we think wow these students are really good.”

Dr. A

However, she also noted that certain hands-on skills, pedagogical and content knowledge attainment may not be optimum due to the nature of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a global issue and not just being experienced by her students.

“It’s just that for Physical Health and Physical Education, the hands-on part is worrying as we could not assess and guide the students as much as we want to.”

Dr. A

“I think the students may thrive in terms of self-management but in terms of content and pedagogical knowledge, these might have been impacted..not just for our students but teacher trainees globally as well. Hence, they need to be aware of these shortcomings and try to improve themselves.”

Dr. A

Lastly, from the interview data, it was found that the final skill that has become paramount in a post-COVID19 world is the students’ self-management skills. As Puan S mentioned:

“Self-management becomes more important because when you work from home, you’re juggling. The definition of juggling now is totally different than how it was. Before this, it used to be 8 hours at work and 8 hours at home. But now it is 8 hours of home and work.”
Puan S.

In addition to the point above, Puan S. continued on to explain why it is important for university policy makers to keep an open mind when making policies, because the policies affects the graduate employability in teaching:

“University is the only platform I believe for you to try and get the students to develop those skills that would make them employable. So when you have policies that says don’t give the students too many assignments, deadlines must be this and that, graduate employability will be affected in teaching.”
Puan S.

5. Recommendation and Conclusion

This article was written as a part of a bigger research project that sought to develop a GE Teaching Model. Treated as the preliminary stage, a semi-structured interview was conducted on two academics as an attempt to uncover their experiences in training GE amidst the pandemic Covid-19. The summary of the findings and suitable recommendations are as follow;

- a) Lecturer Issues: GE development in teaching – an area which is not overtly done as the traits of GE are embedded within lessons; the focus is more on the grasp of the subject matter rather than the GE skills. Therefore, it is recommended that the lecturers are aware of which GE traits they are training in each lesson by emphasizing on an activity or two that spells out the respective GE traits training.
- b) Student & Institution Issues: Critical issues in developing GE – two critical issues identified; student attitudes and the university policy; while much were said about the current generation's lack of interests and motivation towards GE, the university policies do not explicitly spell out the need to treat students as 'future employees of the workforce/industry'. Consequently, it is recommended that the university revisit the policy related to industry collaboration which emphasizes on the participation of the future employers as a part of the students' academic learning experiences from the first semester of their studies.
- c) Lecturer & Institution Issues: Support needed for GE development – further training and faculty's role in identifying training needs of the academics are needed. A series of GE traits and industry participation training and workshops are timely to be recommended based on the finding.
- d) Student Issues: GE Issues post Covid-19 – on a positive note, students are evidently more techno-savvy; on a downside, students lack the hands-on exposure and self-management skills. Hence, a series of training sessions are also required for the students who need to be aware of the importance of GE through the training on self-management skills. The series of training is best done hands-on.

An interesting finding as pointed out by one of the participants is the need for the universities to be 'open-minded' in developing policies that support GE – one aspect that need to be broken away is the need to be 'student-oriented' as the students need to be treated the way the industries would treat them upon employment later.

Although the findings provided preliminary analysis on the issue at hand, it has indeed shed some light on some of the concerns felt by the academics as they attempt to develop their students' GE skills. The pandemic Covid-19 has brought a new norm in the delivery of teaching and learning in which the Open Distance Learning (ODL) approach becomes the key in higher education delivery systems. Some aspects of GE development might have been compromised during the pandemic as students were seen as in need for self-management skills aside from the universities seen as in need for an 'open-minded policy' on GE. This however, would summon for further research to be conducted making more room for future research.

6. Co-author contributions

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 wrote the introduction, research methodology and the conclusion of the results, and overlooked the write-up of the whole article. Author 2 carried out the fieldwork, did the data analysis and interpretations. Author 3 prepared the literature review.

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