

Employer Perceptions on Graduate Literacies in Higher Education in Relation to the Workplace

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Introduction

Around the globe, universities are confronting radical challenges with fundamental changes to society and economies particularly with the rise of the knowledge economy, which is synonymous with development and globalization. University education is faced with challenges including those of migratory and flexible students and workers, neoliberal politics-economics, capital flows, global politics and the internationalisation-regionalisation of education. Complex and contradictory challenges from the global, regional and the local scenes have required innovative responses from the educational community in all parts of the world.

Background literature and theoretical assumptions

Some studies in employability view employability in terms of graduates finding jobs and maintaining them through the learning of new skills necessary for different functions in the company. Hillage and Pollard (1998: 1) sees employability as “having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required”. In other words, employability is referring to individual’s capability to get and keep the desired jobs. According to Harvey (1999: 4), “the employability of a *graduate* is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit *attributes* that employers anticipate will be *necessary* for the *future* effective functioning of their organisation.” In this report, Harvey (1999) indicated that the British Government wanted to establish better links between the graduates and the real world, which meant that relevant government agencies and higher education institutions (HEI) should develop some sort of employability performance indicators to assess how the graduates perform and match against the benchmarks required by employers and industry. Harvey (1999) further reported that United Kingdom employers or companies generally consider graduate attributes as important criteria in the recruitment selection. In other words, excluding the professional disciplines such as medicine, nursing, engineering and sciences, employers in the United Kingdom do not require content specific knowledge/literacy. It seems that they would prefer graduates who have good interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork spirit, and high level of flexibility and adaptability in any working environment. “Employers and their representatives consistently say that, to succeed at work, most people in future must develop a range of personal and intellectual attributes beyond those traditionally made explicit in programmes of study in HEI” (Harvey, 1999: 6).

Maclean and Ordonez (2007) argue that the new 'information age' requires knowledge workers. In line with current developments in the knowledge economy, the Malaysian education system needs to prepare its graduates to become 'new' knowledge workers who are able to “use logical-abstract thinking to diagnose problems, research and apply knowledge,

propose solutions, and design and implement those solutions, often as a member of a team” (Maclean & Ordonez, 2007: 125). Maclean and Ordonez (2007: 131) also states that the key roles for education is “to cultivate the development of multi-dimensional potential of the individual, both for himself or herself, and for society ... more specifically, education, if it is to develop this potential and capability, must see that the several learning needs of the individual are met”.

Employability, Literacy and Higher Education in Malaysia

The Western literature on higher education (HE) in developed countries are concerned with working with multisectors and various stakeholders in the private and public domain to enhance employability through integrated policies and strategies. Malaysia is grappling with quality issues in schooling and HE which impact on its un-employability figures generally understood to be at a worrying 48.5 % (Morsidi Sirat et al., 2004a:12) .

The high incidence of unemployment among public universities graduates in recent years together with the changing HE landscape, the intensely competitive globalised marketplace and industry's call for high quality industry-ready graduates are among the reasons that prompted the establishment of the National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010 by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), to “aims squarely on holistic human capital development, to produce Malaysians who are intellectually active, creative and innovative, articulate, adaptable and capable of critical thinking” (MoHE 2007a: 7).

Employability is a contested discourse involving many stakeholders and actors. They are to do with global actors and local governments, employers, industry, students and academic associations, professional governing bodies, and quality assurance and accreditation agencies.

Current discourse in employability looks at it in terms of strategic partnerships and collaborations across institutions, organizations and sector involving knowledge transfer and flows as well as strategic partnerships. Other scholars are interested in employability in terms of teaching and learning issues in the related domains of ICT, communications and the global-local classroom in HE. It should be noted that the student as an individual is only a single actor within a complex of actors. For example, the so called poor English language proficiency of a Malaysian graduate has to do with sociolinguistic realities in Malaysia over the last forty years. It has to do with language and educational policies that go back many years ago which has in part, exacerbated the divides between the urban and the rural and the urban poor with the urban middle class and rich. Hazita Azman (2006: 99) claims that “underlying the naturalization of teaching and learning of English in the Malaysian education system are ideological pressures and political dogmas, often emerging from colonial, urban/rural and even local ethnic conflicts and hierarchies.”

Further, there are many actors in un-employability issues. For example, in a recent study by Zuraidah Mohd Don et al. (2007), Malaysian lecturers in HE were seen to be inadequate in language and critical literacy. The study was commissioned by MoHE to investigate the standards of English among members of academic staff in Malaysian public universities. This research was designed to assist the government in the formulation of policy on English in order to raise the standards of English among academic staff as a high standard of English proficiency and communication in a global language like English is deemed vital to build local students communication and knowledge building as well as to create international networks. Academic staff needs to develop learning skill and improve their

standard of English and communication in order to work within global networks and importantly, pass on these to their students.

A case study conducted by the National Research Institute for Higher Education or *Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara (IPPTN)* (2007a; 2007b) found that generally employers require their employees to have good communication skills with personal attributes and knowledge in ICT. General skills required by employers are language skills, general and current knowledge, ability to give presentation to clients, basic knowledge in ICT, and work exposure/experience. What was significant was that although the graduates themselves feel that they have acquired necessary skills in ICT and language skills in university, the lecturers thought otherwise. In fact, they complained that their students' performance and abilities have been gradually decreasing in terms of communication skills, level of confidence, thinking and problem solving skills, and motivation and participation in classes' activities, posing serious problems to graduate readiness for employment. It may be inferred from the lecturers' perspectives that graduate inability to adapt and learn new things with their wrong attitudes to learning may have led to the lack of graduate readiness for employment. To overcome this problem, employers have, in fact, suggested longer period of industrial training for the graduates, more collaboration between universities and industries, and also enhancing communication skills and personal qualities, interpersonal skills, thinking skills and ICT skills in the University curriculum.

To enhance the quality of HE, Zalizan Mohd Jelas and Norzaini Azman (2007) identified the development of core and generic skills provisions in courses offered in two Malaysian public universities, based on Dunne et al.'s (2000, in Zalizan Mohd Jelas & Norzaini Azman, 2007) model of course provision. They claimed that core skills are identified as subject content competency, communication skill, numeracy, ICT skill, learning how to learn skill, working with others and know problem solving skill. According to them, core skills may be viewed in relation to competencies, attributes, capabilities, elements and learning outcome. The term 'core skill' refers to "skills acquired for discipline-based skills and generic study in any discipline, and which can potentially be transferred to a range of contexts, in HE or in the workplace" (Dunne et al., 2000, in Zalizan Mohd Jelas & Norzaini Azman (2007:10). They described eight patterns of core skills provision which can be compared to illustrate the different approaches in core skills development in the curriculum. They concluded that emphasis on generic, personal and transferable skills is most common in many approaches of teaching core skills. They recommended the model of course provision as a curriculum planning tool to teach important core skills to the students to match industry needs.

A Conceptual framework of employability in terms of pluriliteracy

In order to prepare graduates for employment, a conceptual framework of pluriliteracy (Koo 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b) was framed around eight literacies which are identified according to changes in workplace and communications contexts. The literacies identified are linguistic proficiency, communicative literacy, culture awareness, content literacy, sustainable citizenship, attitudes and mindset, vocational literacy and critical literacy: This paper is based on the perceptions of employers towards these literacies as captured in their responses to a questionnaire. This forms the findings from a larger Fundamental Research Grant Study which is interested in developing benchmarks of employability based on learner and employer perceptions on employability.

1. Linguistic proficiency

According to Kubler and Forbes (2004), one of the important attributes for student's employability has to do with language proficiency in English and other languages: It refers to abilities and skills in the use of particular languages, the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts including the ability to present sustained and persuasive written and oral arguments cogently and coherently and last but not least, sensitivity to generic conventions and to the shaping effects of language upon communication involving circumstance, authorship, textual production and intended audience.

2. Communicative literacy

Devers (2007) states that communicative literacy involves face-to-face communication and other tools of communication such as internet, ipod and mobile phone, which is essential in the technologically advanced era that we live in now. Kress (2000) argues that new communication in a global context involves multimodal and multimedia literacy and communication literacy on top of face-to-face communication.

3. Culture awareness

UNESCO (2004: 31) has argued that for impact, higher education should involve stakeholders such as the government, businesses and civil society active and prominent roles in promoting cultural diversity. Koo (2007a; 2007b; Koo et al., 2007) argues that awareness of the diversity in cultures as distinguished in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, region, class, and life-styles is important as individuals and groups have to increasingly cope with diversity and difference. Cultural awareness may include the predisposition, ability and willingness to suspend judgement on others especially if their way of being, attitude and/or practice differs. Narsee (1999) stressed the importance of cultural awareness for graduates to learn and work in multiculturally, multilingually diverse environments. She believes this is the sort of empowerment that students will need to acquire in order to be competitive and progressive.

4. Content literacy

Readence et al. (1995: 9-10) states that "One of the fundamental principles of content literacy instruction is that supporting learning from text should involve a focus both on the content to be learned and on the processes students apply as they work to acquire, organize, and integrate that content". The Strategic Learning Center (2000) informs that students have achieved content literacy when they have the skills and strategies that they need, to master the content (of a subject), and to have the ability to manipulate and generalize that content to other learning situations. Hence, content literacy is not only about mastering the content knowledge of a particular field, but having the know-how on how to apply content knowledge appropriately.

5. Sustainable citizenship

UNESCO (2004) defines sustainable citizenship in terms of attitudes and practices of social responsibility towards sustaining democratic and ecological environments. It also involves ethics and values which sustain communities and participation in culturally diverse and yet democratic environments.

6. Attitudes and mindset

The literature (Harvey 1999) describes the attributes or the characteristics or attitudes that graduates should have, in order to be employed as including : (a) Intellectual , openness and curiosity, and a n appreciation of the interconnectedness, and areas of uncertainty, in current human knowledge; (b) research and discovery skill; (c) multifaceted problem solving skills and the capacity for team work; (d) high ethical standards in personal and professional life, underpinned by a capacity for self-directed activity.

7. Vocational literacy

Bates (2002: 1) stated that vocational literacy has to do with “developing industry skills and knowledge that will take students into careers and businesses in the real world”. Vocational literacy would therefore involve the knowledge of global cultures, business and entrepreneurial culture and familiarity with numeric skills and practices.

8. Critical literacy

Critical literacy is identified as (a) critical skills in the close reading and analysis of texts; (b) the ability to understand, interrogate and apply a variety; (c) the ability to understand, interrogate and apply a variety of theoretical positions and weigh the importance of alternative perspectives; (d) the capacity to adapt and transfer the critical methods of the discipline to a variety of working environment; (e) the capacity for independent thought and judgment, skills in critical reasoning; (f) the ability to comprehend and develop intricate concepts in an open-ended way which involves an understanding of purpose and consequences (Kubler & Forbes, 2004).

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed for the employers, to find out their perceptions on the literacies needed for finding jobs and on their perceptions as to whether the universities provided the necessary training for graduate employability.

The questionnaire was designed around the eight literacies deemed as important in the literature and in relation to the researchers’ ground experience on teaching and learning for employability. The eight literacies are: language proficiency, communicative literacy, cultural awareness, content literacy, general knowledge, sustainable citizenship, attitudes and mindset, vocational literacy and critical literacy.

The survey questionnaire is divided into three sections:

Section A, which consists of background and personal details of the employer;

Section B, which consists of 30 items on views and perceptions on attributes. Each item is given three separate responses by respondents. They are categorised in terms of the following: (1) how important the competency is for work in his/her organization, (2) how adequate the university has been in developing the competency in his/her employees, and (3) how ready his/her organization is to (re)-train the graduate employees to acquire the competency; and

Section C, on importance of the identified literacies/competencies to the organization.

A total of 76 employers from different organizations ranging from domestic companies to international companies responded to the employer questionnaire. Most organizations (32.9%,) fall under manufacturing sector. This is followed by education sector

(17.1%), architecture and construction sector (10.5%), information technology sector (6.6%) and transportation sector (5.3%). Quite a number of organizations are medium-sized (40.8%) and large-sized (40.8%). Small-sized organizations only make up 18.4% of the organizations.

Descriptive statistics involving frequency and percentage were used for data from Section B. In Section C, the means of responses were computed, which were used to rank the importance of the competencies.

Key findings

1) Linguistic proficiency

Linguistic proficiency is measured by two attributes: i.e. oral and written communication in one local language (Attribute 6), and knowledge of a second and a foreign language which is an international/global language (Attribute 7).

The majority of the employers agree that linguistic proficiency is very important for the organization, with 85.5% agree for Attribute 6 and 80.1% for Attribute 7. 43.4% of the employers expressed their willingness to re-train their graduate employees for Attribute 7. This shows that employers view knowledge of second language or foreign language, as very important for their organization. Although the majority (56.7%) feels that the public universities had developed Attribute 6 in our graduates, yet some (23.7%) are rather undecided over the readiness of their organization to re-train the graduates in this aspect. Perhaps, the employers feel that public universities should train the graduates to be well prepared in oral and written communication.

It should however, be noted that the language proficiency of graduates could be viewed in terms of functional English for workplace environments which are different from academic environments. With globalization, knowledge creation is primarily privileged through English as a *lingua franca* beyond the native speaker inner circle centres, employers and universities need to consider the English Language as functional English as a *lingua franca* mode within the existing pluralistic repertoire of language codes, nativised and used by the majority of people whose mother tongue is not English. Plural and contextualised norms of communication would have to be considered in relation to the contexts of use of diverse Englishes for different purposes. Access, equity and empowerment issues in international education would have to consider greater political, social and educational tolerance for nativised varieties for example World Englishes (Kachru, 1990). The fact is that the English language proficiency of Malaysian learners in schools and university deteriorated over the last thirty years with the implementation of a national language policy where Bahasa Malaysia became the language of instruction in schools and HE in the late sixties. In 2002, there was a radical shift in language policy in education where English became the medium of instruction for the teaching of science and technology both in school and university. This was a government initiative in a concerted national effort to make Malaysian globally competitive. Current Malaysian strategic economic planning is focused on the development of a intensely competitive knowledge-based economy in which human capital is of striking importance. In this respect, Malaysia's K-economy Master Plan focuses on the development of Malaysia's human resources as a means to lift economic growth to an internationally comparable level. The issue confronting Malaysian education is to bridge the gap between existing language realities of graduates with the requirements in the global environment.

2) Communicative literacy

Communicative literacy is measured by three attributes, i.e. elementary computing skills such as using Microsoft Office applications (Attribute 8), information management skills (Attribute 11), and ability to communicate with non-experts (Attribute 21).

The skills as stated above are perceived as vital for their organizations by the employers, as reflected in the statistics. There are 59.2% of employers who strongly agree and 36.84% agree to Attribute 8. The employers feel that public universities has prepared the graduates adequately in this aspect (14.47% strongly agree; 53.95% agree). They are also ready to train the graduates (14.47% strongly agree; 46.65% agree) as the employers consider basic computing skills such as know-how of Microsoft applications as necessary for their organizations. A large proportion of the employer's respondents agrees to Attribute 11 (47.37% strongly agrees; 40.79% agrees), which reflects the importance of information management skills in a workplace. The employers expect their employees to be responsible in managing company's information especially dealing with sensitive data that are of utmost importance to the company's well being and livelihood.

In terms of whether Malaysian public universities have developed this skills in our graduates, while there are 3.95% who strongly agree and 42.11% agree, one third of them (35.53%) are uncertain in this aspect. The employers are ready to train their graduate employees in order to be able to manage information well (6.57% strongly agree; 61.84% agree).

3) Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is measured using two attributes: appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism (Attribute 22) and understanding of cultures and customs of other countries and other groups (Attribute 24).

The employers agree that the cultural awareness is important for their organization. 43.4% of the employers definitely agree and 47.4% agree to Attribute 22, while 26.3% definitely agree to attribute 24 and 51.3% agree. In view that we live in increasingly multicultural global, international and local contexts, appreciation of cultural diversity is crucial. The ability to understand and negotiate differences in terms of cultural practice, values, norms, beliefs and perceptions, is crucial to workplace interactions to build networks, and to prevent conflicts and misunderstanding.

In terms of their perception as to whether the Malaysian public universities had developed these attributes in our graduate employees, there are some differing views and mixed responses. With regards to Attribute 22, there are obvious mixed feelings as there are 35.5% who agree with this statement but 36.8% are undecided. The un-decidedness of the employers hinted that they are not sure as to whether the universities had covered the aspect of cultural awareness and multiculturalism in the university's courses. This is probably due to the lack of exposure of the employers to the curricula content of public universities in Malaysia. On the other hand, 31.6% of the employers feels that the public universities had not developed the inter- and cross-cultural awareness that is, attribute 24 in the graduates, while about half (43.4%) of them are undecided. Compare this with universities in the UK where there are clear policies and implementation of policies where the employers are brought into discussion on content of courses (Harvey et al., 2002). However, it must be recognized that employability concerns are increasingly high in Government and HE policies

and strategies (MoHE, 2007a). Indeed university courses are now required to factor this into their structures, processes and outputs.

There are 51.3% of employers who feels that their organizations are ready to re-train the graduates in this respect. However there are also 25% who are undecided, which may probably be caused by their lack of understanding of the importance of the cultural awareness in the workplace and its significance to their organization. It is the same kind of responses with regards to Attribute 24 where the majority (46.1%) feels that their organization are ready to train their graduate employees. In general, most employers would provide training to make sure that their employees are culturally adaptable and able to work in many different cultural settings and diverse groups.

4) Content Literacy

Content literacy is measured by the capacity for applying knowledge in practice (Attribute 2) and research skills (Attribute 9).

Employers ranked content literacy as the second most important competency to their company with the mean of 3.1974 (out of possible maximum of 9) after competency of attitude and mindset (3.0132). Majority of the respondents perceive content literacy as important literacy for graduates who intend to work in their company. There are 52.63% who think that the capacity for applying knowledge in practice is most important while 44.74% think that it is one of the essential skills that they are looking in the local graduate employees. However, less than half (40.79%) of the employers agree that the public university has developed the competency of one area of specialization in their graduate employees. There are 28.95 % of them who are unable to decide, and 30.26% of them think that this skill is not well trained in the local graduate employee. 80.26% of employers feel that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with such skills.

78.95% of the employer respondents see research skills as important skills in their companies. A small proportion of 10.52% do not agree with this which strikes one as strange initially but on further consideration, they might be employers from smaller establishments who do not regard research and development as part of their company priorities. In regard as to whether this literacy has been well developed by the public university, merely a small percentage of 5.26 think that the university has definitely prepared the students with sufficient research skills for their future careers. Meanwhile, 34.21% of the employer respondents agree that the university has developed some basic research skills in the local graduates. On the other hand, there are 22.37% of the employers who feel that the university has not done a good job on such skills. 48.69% feel that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with such skill.

5) Sustainable Citizenship

Sustainable citizenship was measured in the survey questionnaire in terms of the ability to think-act in an international/global context (Attribute 23) and commitment to ethics (Attribute 28).

The employer respondents ranked sustainable citizenship literacy as the least important competency for the work in their organization with the mean of 7.7237. More than 80% of the respondents perceive ability to think-act in an international/global context as important for work in their organization. 39.47% think that this competency is important while 47.37% think that this is definitely one of the most important skills that they are

searching for in employees. The employers realize that this competency is important as some serious efforts and collaboration has been done to cover the sustainable citizenship in many part of the worlds.

In contrast, 47.37% of the employers feel that the local public university has not prepared the graduates to think-act in an international/global context. 39.47% are unable to decide. The employers who think that this skill is well trained in the local graduates are merely from a small percentage of 13.15% of the total respondents. 64.47% feel that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with such skill.

More than 90% of the employer respondents perceive commitment to ethics as important to their company. 61.84% see this attribute as one of the most crucial skills in graduates while 31.58% feel that this attribute is important for work in their organization. Nevertheless, the majority of them are unable to decide whether the university has developed this attribute in their graduate. This number is higher than those who feel that the attribute has been developed sufficiently by the university (36.84%). On the other hand, 21.05% disagree that this skill is well trained in local graduates. 67.11% feel that their company is ready to train the graduate employees in research literacy.

6) Attitude and Mindset

Attitude and mindset was measured by six attributes: capacity to learn beyond university (Attribute 10), capacity to adapt to new situations (Attribute 13), interpersonal skills (Attribute 18), leadership (Attribute 19), ability to work independently (Attribute 25) and the will to succeed (Attribute 30).

The employer respondents ranked appropriate mindset and attitude as the most important competency for the work in their organization with a mean of 3.0132. However, 34.21% of the employers feel that local public university has not developed this capacity in their graduates. Meanwhile, 34.21% are unable to decide on this question, and 31.57% agree that the university has developed some aspects of this capacity in their students. 59.21% of the employers say that their organization is ready to train their graduate employees with this competency.

90.79% of the employers see the capacity to adapt to new situations as one of the crucial attributes in graduate employees. However, only 30.27% of them agree that this attribute is well developed by the local public university. 38.16% are unable to decide and 31.58% do not think that the public university has equipped the students sufficiently with this capacity. However, 55.26% of them agree that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with this skill. 27.63% are unable to decide, and 17.1% said that they are not ready to do so.

98.68% of employers see interpersonal skills as one of the crucial attributes in graduate employees. However, only 40.79% of them agree that this attribute is well developed by the local public university. 40.79% are unable to decide and 18.42% do not think that the public university has equipped the students sufficiently with this capacity. However, 82.63% of them agree that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with this skill.

94.73% of the employers see leadership skills as one of the crucial attributes in graduate employees. However, only 31.58% of them agree that this attribute is well developed by the local public university. 32.89% are unable to decide and the majority of them (35.52%) do not think that the public university has equipped the students sufficiently

with this capacity. Nevertheless, 76.32% of them agree that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with leadership skill.

All of the employers perceive the ability to work independently as one of the crucial attributes in graduate employees. However, less than 50% of them (47.37%) of them agree that this attribute is well developed by the local public university. 28.95% are unable to decide and 23.68% do not think that the public university has equipped the students sufficiently with this capacity. On the other hand, 71.06% of them agree that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with this skill.

94.74% perceive the will to succeed as an important skill to their company. Nonetheless, less than 50% of employers feel that the local university has trained graduates with this attribute. (43.42%). 34.21% are unable to decide. Meanwhile, 22.37% do not think that the public university has prepared the local graduate employees with such competency. 71.05% feel that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with such skills.

To summarise, there seems to some agreement between global requirements for employability for some of the literacies. However there is a disturbing gap between global expectations of learning organisations with the actual perceptions of Malaysia employers on the appropriate attributes for participation in their organizations particularly on the literacy for sustainability. MoHE has in its policies required universities to structure the development of such key literacies in their graduates. (MoHE, 2007a, 2007b). However, Nelson (2007) has argued that implementation of policies remains the biggest challenge for quality, access and equity in terms of education provision. Nelson (2007: 34) has cogently argued, “Globalisation is indeed increasing the urgency of rapid improvements in educational performance. Accelerating economic competition penalizes slow change”. In other words, employability issues are much larger – it does not involve only employers but educational performance of HE. The graduates themselves are not to be blamed unnecessarily as they are often held to be largely responsible for their un-employability.

Fundamentally, we see this gap between graduate competencies and employer expectation as an opportunity for innovation, one where Universities work with employers in industry to maximise their knowledge flows both within the country across sectors and without, internationally. In a knowledge economy, it seems imperative for university to collaborate with teachers on the ground level who understand the realities of the learners . At the same time, HE has to work with industry to leverage on their knowledge and technology systems. (OECD, 1996; IPPTN, 2007a, 2007b).

7. Professional Competency

Professional competency is measured by ten attributes: planning and time management (Attribute 3), basic general knowledge in the field of study (Attribute 4), grounding in basic knowledge of the profession in practice (Attribute 5), problem solving (Attribute 15), decision-making (Attribute 16), team work (Attribute 17), ability to work in an interdisciplinary team (Attribute 20), project design and management (Attribute 26), initiative and entrepreneurial spirit (Attribute 27), and concern for quality in terms of services rendered and received (Attribute 29).

The majority of the employers agree that the 10 attributes above are important for work in their organization. 52.6% strongly agree to Attribute 3, while 52.6% (n=40) agree to Attribute 4. There are 44.8%, 65.8%, 56.6%, 67.1% and 67.1% who strongly agree for Attributes 5, 15, 16, 17 and 29 respectively. 52.6% strongly agree and 42.1% agree to

Attribute 20. Half of them agree that competency 26 is also important for their organization. It shows that problem solving, teamwork and ability to work in an interdisciplinary team are 3 major competencies/ that graduates should have and viewed as important by the On the other hand, there are some interesting responses from the employers in terms of their perception on the degree to which public universities have taught these literacies. In this regard, there are quite high percentages of employers who are undecided, especially for Attributes 3 (36.8%), Attribute 15 (31.6%), Attribute 16 (30.3%), Attribute 20 (40.8%), Attribute 26 (32.9%) and Attribute 29 (35.5%). This indicate that the employers are not sure of the adequacy of public universities in teaching and delivering such literacies . Besides, employers may be uncertain as to whether the graduate/ employee have been well prepared in this regard as there are no common benchmarks or indicators to assess the graduates' competencies. As for Attributes 4 and Attribute 5, there are 61.8% and 48.7% who strongly agree to each competency. 48.7% are also of the same perception and agree to Attribute 17. Moreover, 43.4% of them agree to Attribute 27.

It is interesting to note that while the employers agree that basic general knowledge in the field of study (Attribute 4) is important in their organization and our public universities has developed this competency in our graduates, some are still undecided on whether their organizations are ready to re-train the graduates' employees in this competency (27.6%). Yet, many of them (40.8%) are ready to do so in this aspect. The uncertainty portrayed by some of the employers contradicts their initial agreement that this competency is vital for their organization.

56.6% of employers are ready to teach competency 3, 17, and 20. There are 55.3% who are ready to teach competency 5, 64.5% to competency 15, 63.2% to competency 16, 61.8% to competency 26, and 30.1 to competency 29. As for competency 27, while 46.1% are ready to train the graduate this competency, there are still 31.6% whom are not sure or uncertain whether they want to train their graduate employees in this aspect. Most probably, the employers' feels that it should be the graduate's own responsibility to cultivate the entrepreneurial spirit, in order to excel and perform better in the organization. However, "vocational training is an exciting first step towards their future career ... the focus is instead on developing industry skills and knowledge that will take them into careers and businesses in the real world" (Bates, 2002: 1). The employers should not hesitate in making training of the vocational skills available to the employees during their tenure with the organization. This will increase the employee's vocational knowledge which will help in developing better work skills.

8) Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is measured by capacity for analysis and synthesis (Attribute 1), critical and self-critical abilities (Attribute 12), and capacity for generating new ideas (Attribute 14). Employers ranked critical thinking literacy as the sixth most important literacy to their companies with the mean of 4.7500. The statistics show that majority of the employers perceive critical thinking literacy as important for work in their organization, with a positive response rate of over 40%.

56.58% of the employers think that the attribute of capacity for analysis and synthesis as the most crucial skill that they are looking for in graduates and 42.11% of them feel that it is an important skill that the graduates should have for their work in any organization. However, 38.16% of the employers think that the Malaysian public university has not

adequately developed this skill in the graduate employees. Even so, 36.84 % of them think that the university has prepared the graduates with such skill satisfactorily. The percentage of those employers who are undecided with this question is 25%. On the other hand, 73.69% feel that their company is ready to train the graduate employees with such skill.

43.42% of the employers think that critical and self-critical abilities is an important skill for their companies and 38.16% think that it is the most important skill they are looking for in graduate employees. However, there are 36.84% of the employers who do not think that our public university has trained the graduates with this skill, and 39.47% are undecided. The percentage of those employers who feel that the public university has done sufficiently with developing graduates with this critical competency is 23.68%, a percentage much lower than those employers who are disagree on this. On the other hand, 47.37% said that their company is ready to train the graduate employees to develop their critical and self-critical abilities.

On the attribute of creativity and ability to generate new ideas, the majority of the employers see creativity as important. 51.32% of the employers perceive this ability as most important to their organization. Meanwhile, 40.79% feel that this skill is one of the crucial skills for work in their organization. The statistical result shows how important those critical thinking skills are for the employers. However, 38.16% of the employer respondents feel that the universities have not trained their graduates well and 35.53% of employers are unable to decide. 26.31% of the employers think that graduates are well developed with such skill in university. On the other hand, 59.21% of the employers said that their organization is ready to train their graduate employees to become more creative in work.

The statistical data above indicates that critical literacy is perceived as very important by employers, and it is ranked critical and self-critical abilities needs to be taught in the university parallel with the content knowledge as perceived as an important skill by the employers. Employers are willing to re-train the graduates who are lacking in this skill.

Malaysian universities have since 2005 advocated critical thinking. Whether or not this remains only at the policy level is still to be seen. Generally, the perception is that a transmissive mode of practice prevails. It is widely known that critical thinking is often regarded as politically risky and pedagogically risky due to the larger sociopolitical and cultural environment which has impacted on the learning and teaching environment privileging transmissive learning and examination orientated thinking and learning habits (Koo, 2004) despite attempts at liberalization of schools with the KBSM and KBSR since 1990's (Lee, 1999). A very teacher-centered pedagogy in the curriculum in primary and secondary school education system, coupled with an excess focus on memorization and studying examination formulaic responses has constrained critical literacy in Malaysian students. Students tend to be decoders in large part socialised by the dominant culture of transmissive learning, sociopolitical structures of high collectivism and compliance and an intensely top-down examination system given to rewarding for formulaic responses to predictable examination questions which are high stakes for 'success'.

In her theory of mindful pluriliteracy, Koo (2007a, 2007b) argues that if literacy experiences are not explored in classrooms teachers may be held responsible for institutionalising learners lacking voice and agency as they are subsumed by dominant literacy practices and literacy events from across sociopolitical structures and communities within texts. Such learners will tend not have the ability or to state their views, their opinions and their feelings towards what they read. They become unduly accepting of dominant views

in the texts. Critical literacy, she argues, will enable readers to compete in a global world. In teaching critical literacy, HE teachers have to be mindful of the dominant social practices of reading and learning in the classroom and in the wider sociopolitical contexts. Critical literacy has to be situated in the contexts and experiences of learners so that they question and reconstructing naturalized or embedded textual assumptions, HE leaders and teachers themselves should be mindful as to the ways in which they themselves and their learners have previously been dominantly socialized into normal or familiar literacy habits (Koo, 2007a, 2007b).

Scholars like Langer and Applebee (1988) argue that effective learning cannot rely only on content knowledge and instructional tasks only. They argue that we need to identify plural ways of learning as crucial to development of holistic graduates with a repertoire of literacies required for new global environments where diversity of norms, practices, cultural assumptions and beliefs are increasingly normal. What constitutes knowing and learning are not restricted to what the experts and scholars inform us, but how we treat these perceived facts in given reality, to make sense and relate to our diverse environments and diverse communities and individuals (Langer & Applebee, 1988). Issues of world citizenry has become the concerns of UNESCO and civil societies which have impacted on awareness of 'global civic' attributes of a mobile graduate who may vote for security, merit and recognition of quality work in a shared democratic space.

Concluding Remarks

For the mean rank of the importance of a particular competency to the organization, employers rank positive attitudes and mindset (mean=3.0132) as the most important, followed by competency in area of specialisation or content area (3.1974), competency in communication (3.7368), vocational/professional competency (4.0789), competency in language communication (4.6316), critical thinking (4.7500), general knowledge (6.4737), culture awareness (mean) and finally, sustainable citizenship (7.7237). Positives attitudes and mindset, competency in area of specialisation and communication competency are most important and regarded as essential for the employers. This contrasted with the graduate's perceptions of rankings or importance of each literacy as discussed in the learner analysis earlier. While employers do not pay attention to sustainable citizenship and critical literacy, graduates in general perceive these two literacies as among the most important literacies. It is important to emphasize that it may suggest different goals and purposes of graduates as compared to employers who were respondents in this survey questionnaire. A greater convergence between graduate expectations and employer provision may lead to more productivity and retention of the best in the workplace.

The gaps between the future of learning and the realities of intensively competitive knowledge economies and ground level employer perceptions of graduate abilities need to be systemically engaged at the policy and implementation of HE and human capital. As Nelson (2007) argues, it is the implementation of policy that is the nub of effective education, not least HE.

HEI would need to establish and develop links through knowledge and research exchanges, collaboration and cooperation with employers in the private and public sector. With intense changes in the organisation and nature of knowledge economies, it seems imperative that such links are worked at so that there is synergistic development of employable graduates in HE and in industry.

As part of policies to develop private and public education the National Higher Education Action Plan (MoHE, 2007a) and the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (MoHE, 2007b) seek to strategically position Malaysian university within the global knowledge societies. In this regard, their collaborations with industry and the private sector are assumed. This would obviously impact on the production of graduates who are globally situated with global attributes of employability characterized by life-long learning, adaptability and inter-culturally competent.

In terms of current trends where the student is viewed as potentially globally mobile if he/she is engaged in knowledge production for knowledge economies within the broad scenarios of learners who are migrants, looking for security and engaged with world citizenry issues, employers need to think beyond merely profits to sustainable learners, communities and environments, which unfortunately, few seem to recognise at this stage. Synergistic collaborations in research and innovation will mutually engage partners in frontline issues and challenges as indicated by OECD and World Bank Reports.

However, Tierney (2008: 21) states in a cautionary note about attributing international rankings of top US University to marketplace imperatives “I have argued that to view the American system from the vantage point of a market-based framework and little more is wrong-headed. While a capitalist country such as the United States in the early 21st century is surely to enact, rightly or wrongly, particular market-based strategies, the transformation of the American system is not simply a financial switch that gets turned on or off. The vast majority of American institutions in the top 100 of both international rankings have been in existence for well over a century. I have suggested that the philosophical underpinnings of the system have more to do with the position of the United States in these rankings than do market-based incentives.” Tierney (2008:14) further argues that the philosophical underpinnings are related to five key ideas: (1) academic freedom, (2) merit, (3) civic and personal obligations, (4) autonomy and shared governance, and (5) quality control – form the framework for how to view the “American model.” Each idea has its own trajectory and has changed over time, but their routes are intertwined and over a century old. By no means do I wish to suggest that each of these ideas has been implemented on every campus without significant challenges”.

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