Unemployment among Malaysian Graduates:
Graduates’ Attributes, Lecturers’ Competency and Quality of Education

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Abstract

The increasing rate of unemployed graduates is one of the issues that triggers world’s concerns lately. Consequently, this research aims to investigate factors that lead to the unemployment problem among Malaysian graduates from three aspects, which are graduates’ attributes, lecturers’ competency and quality of education. This qualitative research adopted an interview method, which was conducted to seven respondents who have the experience in teaching and working in the industry. The majority of the respondents agreed that the graduates’ attributes, lecturers’ competency and the quality of education, which is referred to the curriculum of a study field, are among the factors that contribute to the unemployment problem among the Malaysian graduates nowadays. Therefore, it is reasonable for the parties who are involved in the construction and the enhancement of the curriculum of the related to the field of study to conduct an in-depth study. This should be done in order to identify the problems that occur throughout the implementation of the study area. It is important to evaluate the suitability of the implementation of a curriculum of the study area in order to ensure the implemented curriculum can produce human resources, which are qualified, skillful and can fulfill the need of the industries and the current market.

Keywords: Unemployment, graduates’ attributes, lecturers’ competency, quality of education
Introduction

Human capital resources, which are full of potential and competitive, are needed in this globalization era. Even though it is not written in any profit and loss reports of any organization, this type of human capital is vital in determining the performance of an organization or a country. Without qualified human capital resources, a country becomes weak as the lack of human factor that can initiate new initiatives in socioeconomic activities (Asmawati, 2009). However, producing human capital resources that are comprehensive and at a world class level is not an easy task and it is a challenge to Malaysia.

Currently, unemployment among the graduates becomes an issue, not only in Malaysia but also around the world. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2011) found that the unemployment rate in Malaysia had increased from 3.2% in 2007 to 3.7% in 2009. The Minister of Human Resources, Datuk Fong Chan Onn, stated that the National Economic Action Council with the collaboration of the Department of Human Manpower had conducted a census in 2005 and it is found that 59000 graduates and diploma holders were unemployed and 30000 graduates worked in a field that do not match with their higher educational qualifications. Based from resources of job vacancies and job placement in Peninsular Malaysia in 2012, it is revealed that job vacancies are increasing from year to year. However, these job vacancies are filled by only a part of the workers. This shows that the unemployment issue is happened not because of the lack of job opportunities instead it happens because of other factors such as the low quality of a graduate. Even though the unemployment rate in Malaysia is considered low as compared to countries like the United States and other countries in Europe, it is not an issue to be neglected. This is because graduates are human workforce that is vital and become the core for innovative and productive high-income economy. Therefore, this paper aims to identify primary factors that lead to the unemployment issue among the Malaysian graduates and hence it can hopefully become guidelines in curbing this problem.

Unemployment Issue in Malaysia

Rahmah et al., (2011) mentioned that one of the factors that contribute to the unemployment problem among the Malaysian graduates is the quality of the graduates. There are employers in the industry, who gave negative comments on the graduates and mentioned that the graduates do not have the suitable skills and qualifications, which meet the needs of the industry. Besides, the graduates are weak in the aspect of employability skills and do not show a good working performance. A study conducted by Central Bank of Malaysia (2002) also found that the Malaysian graduates are less skilled as compared to the international graduates. The skills include technical skills, problem-solving skills and communication skills, especially in English language.

Ranjit (2009) mentioned that ten primary weaknesses of Malaysian graduates are in the aspect of management, problem-solving, communication, leadership, creativity, critical thinking, proactive, self-confidence and interaction skills. These aspects lead to the difficulties for the graduates in obtaining jobs, which meet their qualifications. While Nasrudin (2004) stated the eleven factors that lead to the unemployment problem among the graduates are the relationship
between capital intensive economy, a rapid increase of graduated workforce, lack of the relationship between educational institutions and the industry, lack of training for work preparation, rapid increase of the population rate and rapid decrease of the mortality rate, educational development, economic recession, quality of education, capability of graduates, and the graduates’ skills and personalities.

There are also job industries reporting that the reason for job vacancies in a working field is because of lack of candidates, who are qualified for the posts. This is shown from a report by National Associated of Manufactured (NAM), in which it is revealed that there are gaps exists in the range of skillfulness in almost all of the working fields (Kahirol et al., 2008). Consequently, this is the reason that makes an interviewed candidate is not selected to fulfill a post as the candidate do not meet the requirements by the industry. A study conducted by Ramlee et al., (2008) found that nowadays graduates of Higher Educational Institutions in Malaysia have a minimum preparation in facing the globalization and k-economy era. Subsequently, the graduates are facing problems in gaining a place in a working world, as they are not able to compete and give a full commitment to a work. This matter is a regret because the inability for the Malaysian graduates to fulfill job vacancies in Malaysia resulting in the hiring of foreign workers.

Currently, a good academic achievement is no longer a guarantee for the Malaysian graduates to get a job (Noor Azina, 2011). It is a benefit for the graduates but it is not a guarantee for them to be given jobs and it also does not show that the graduates are able to conduct the tasks given by the employers. Since there is a big gap between the quality levels of the Malaysian graduates with the international standard, this matter needs to be handled in order to ensure that our country has skilled, versatile and marketable graduates (10th Malaysian Plan, 2010). Based from a human capital theory by Becker (1964) it is stated that human capital that has a high knowledge and skills contribute to the increase of the country’s economic productivity. Becker (1964) also stated that a high investment in producing useful human capitals is important as long as it give high and positive impacts to the economic productivity.

**Research Methodology**

This research adopted a qualitative research methodology. Semi structured interview was conducted on seven respondents. The respondents are lecturers who are teaching at the universities, lecturers who are teaching at the Public Skills Training Institutes in Malaysia and employers in the industry. The respondents were selected based on purposive sampling method, in which the researcher identified individuals who have relevant information with the phenomenon that want to be studied (Merriam, 2009).
Findings of the Study

Findings of the study show that the majority of the respondents agreed that graduates' attributes, lecturers' competency and the quality of education, which is referred to the curriculum of a study field, are factors that contribute to the unemployment problem among Malaysian graduates. Therefore, the findings of this study are divided into three categories, which are graduates' attributes, lecturers' competency and the quality of education.

Graduates’ Attributes

Graduates attributes are the quality or skills that need to be gained by the graduates and need to be developed by the graduates when they are at the higher educational institutions. Qualities acquired by the graduates prepare them for their future undertakings (Bowden et al. 2000). For graduates’ attributes, the focus is channeled on two types of skill, which are technical and employability skills. Technical skill is an important aspect that should be mastered by graduates, as it is the core that enables the graduates to get jobs. While employability skill refers to the quality and personal insight, in which a graduate should have. This is to help with the marketability of the graduate and to help the graduate to become a competence and competitive worker. The findings show that the majority of respondents agreed that a lack of technical skill and poor employability skill among the graduates is one of the factors that lead to the unemployment problem. This is shown through the statement below:

*Technical skills are important. As well as practical and theories. The importance of technical skill is when it comes to applying it to a real situation."*(Nora)*

"Technical skills are an asset to the graduates. If the graduates cannot master it, how are they going to work? But most of the students, they cannot recall what they have learned in the past"*(Aminah)*

"Students are lack of discipline, fining the students does not affect them, lack of time management, picky in choosing job"*(Nora)*

“Students are not creative in solving problem, picky in choosing job and choose only easy jobs."*(Suhasini)*

"Employability skills are the working skills. Punctuality, communication are important and the industry favours English language. Students should be more open .. (the students
are) most of the time lazy…(the students) cannot be instructed. Lack of discipline. Lack of responsibility. Employability skills should be shown during the interview…students are good at showing off. "(Aminah)

"Employability skills are important skills in order to keep the existing job. Communication, body languages and a high commitment should be there whilst working." (Syiris)

Lecturers’ Competency

The quality of lecturers is an important factor that determines the quality of university graduates. Lecturers are not only bound to their daily task of educating but their behaviors become examples and models to the students (Nur Zakiah Hani and Masnora, 2011). Therefore, lecturers should have good characters and personal qualities as well as professionally and socially competent. Competencies are described as the abilities to perform a task (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). According to Palan (2003) competency comprises of five characteristics, which are knowledge, skills, personal values, attitudes and motivation in doing a task. Findings of the study show that the majority of respondents stated that lecturers’ competency is one of the factors that cause the unemployment problem among graduates. This is depicted in the following statements:

"Most of the new lecturers are lack of skills in teaching methods, classroom control. Lecturers need to change and they need exposure to the industry to make them able to master high-leveled skills. Lecturers should be able to initiate and search for new ideas." (Ramlan)

"The current lecturers are less experienced, less exposure to the industry, lack of competencies and some of them are not interested in their working field. Facing problems related to teaching methods". (Suhaimi.)

"Every lecturer must have working experience in the industry". (Nora).

"Every lecturer should be given continuous trainings and courses."(Aminah).

Quality of Education
A good quality of education is necessary to achieve customers’ satisfaction. Students as customers are entitled to a good quality of education and they have the right to assess an educational institution (Roselena, 2007). Hoy and Miskel (2005) stated that among the factors that affect the effectiveness of an educational institution are leadership, quality of the curriculum, classroom climate, achievement-oriented, effective learning time, structured teaching and recognition of a success. Findings of the study show that the majority of respondents agreed that the quality of education affect the unemployment problem among Malaysian graduates. This is shown through the statements below:

"Improve the curriculum by including additional skills for the graduates, create links with the industry so that the industry can provide job opportunities for the graduates." (Aminah)

"Every developed curriculum should meet the requirements and in line with the needs of the industry. It needs to be based work-based learning ". (Nora)

"The curriculum needs to be improved by making relationships with the industry ". (Ramlan)

"The curriculum gives less exposure to the real working environment and not in accordance with current developments." (Suaimi)

Discussion

Graduates’ Attributes

Employability skills and technical skills are skills that should be obtained by graduates, as those are important criteria that can help them to get jobs. Findings of the study are revolved on the technical and employability skills among the graduates that became the factor for the unemployment issue. Through the findings, it is revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that most of the graduates having problems in applying what they learned at the educational institutions with the working places. Besides, most of the graduates are having problems from the aspect of employability skills. This includes problem in the communication skill especially in English language, the graduates are not well-disciplined and do not have the leadership skills.

A study conducted by Ramlee at al., (2008) found that nowadays, the university students have a minimum preparation in facing the globalization and the k-economy era. Consequently, these graduates are facing problem in getting a place at a working world, as they are not able to compete and give commitments to a work. The Graduate Tracer Study Report in 2009 found that about 81.7% of the unemployed graduates stated that they are in a dire need of additional
trainings. These include trainings of English language skills, career development, ICT skills, communication skills and entrepreneurial skills (Graduates Tracer Study System by Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Lack of high-leveled skills especially in technical skills and employability skills influence the concept of employability and become one of the factors to unemployment problem among the graduates (Susima & Sununta, 2003).

The current world of development in this technological era emphasizes on the mastering of technical skills (hard skills) and employability skills by every graduate. Employers and the industry associations commonly associate the lack of soft skills such as a positive work ethic, communication skills, team working, decision-making skill and leadership as a key factor affecting the employability of Malaysian graduates. Abd Hair et al., (2007) mentioned that technical and employability skills become a determining factor for a graduate to get a job. Therefore, it is important to include elements of technical and employability skills in the curriculum for each course or field of study, which are offered in educational institutions.

**Lecturers’ Competency**

Barrie (2006) stated that in Australia, it becomes the responsibility of a lecturer to integrate characteristics of a skillful graduate in the curriculum. Ismail (2012) mentioned that the quality of graduates is depending on the educator. The examples include the reference materials that are used and a conducive environment (infrastructure, socialization, location and others) that contribute towards the development of a good personality and an excellent academic achievement. The task of lecturers is important, as they are required to educate the graduates to become excellent human capitals, which will serve and develop the economy of a country. However, not all lecturers could carry this task with their fullest heart. Findings of the study show that the majority of respondents agreed that the competency of a lecturer, especially in the process teaching and learning, greatly influences the achievement of a graduate.

Findings also show that lecturers at the higher educational institutions should be given intensive training and consistent courses in order to increase their skills or competencies in line with the current technology and new information. This is a consequence from remarks by respondents, who stated that there are inexperienced lecturers, who are not able to properly manage students during the teaching and learning sessions. In addition, there are lecturers, who are not interested in their job. Consequently, the students do not get appropriate input according to the outlined curriculum. Ahmad Eismat (2009) also found that there were lecturers at a higher educational institution in Malaysia, who did not emphasize on planning and organizing skills in teaching and learning activities. Lecturers should be aware that these skills are important to be acquired by graduates. Based on the current development and preparation for producing the next generation of human resources, the ability of educational institutions is doubtful. Requirements such as excellent educators, a conducive learning environment and critical reference materials for implementing the educational process are not clear (Ismail, 2012). A qualified workforce is determined by the educational quality. Therefore, lecturers as educators and guiders should be able to produce graduates who are capable and qualified.
**Quality of Education.**

Quality in an educational field is not a change instead; it is a choice (Advant & Makhirja, 2003). According to Thete (2003), the quality of education is depending on the quality of teaching and learning process, educational facilities and infrastructures, well-planned curriculum and an effective implementation of the curriculum. Higher education is considered a key to graduates’ career development. The increasing number of the public and private educational institutions in Malaysia results to a competition among the educational institutions and the increase of unemployed graduates. Findings of the study show that the quality of education, especially at the higher educational institutions, becomes a major factor to the unemployment problem among Malaysian graduates.

Deputy Minister of Human Resources, Datuk Abdul Rahman Bakar, also said that the main factor to the unemployment problem among graduates is the failure to ensure educational syllabus or curriculum consistent with the matters required in the job market (Utusan Malaysia, 18th May 2005). The function of universities in providing curriculum and components of educational field are not in line with the required workplace skills. This leads to the difficulties among the graduates to obtain jobs, which match their skills and qualifications. This also leads to a problem, in which graduates are not able to implement what they have learned at the educational institutions in their working field. Susima & Sununta (2003) stated that nearly 20,000 graduates in Sri Lanka were unemployment and this was due to the skills acquired by the graduates did not meet the requirements by the employers and the skills were not in accordance with the current market. Shujaat et al., (2009) agreed that most of university graduates were less knowledgeable, less skilled and were not in accordance with the needs of the industry. Employers and the industry also mentioned that the curriculum at the higher educational institutions should be revamped as many of the graduates produced by the institutions did not meet a satisfactory level of job competencies (Study Report by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2007).

Marchante, Bienvenido & Pagan (2011) stated that mismatch, which are occurred in the education and skills represent the gap that occurs between the criteria and requirements needed by the industry, which are not fulfilled with the education and skills. Mismatch, which is occurred between education and skills with the working field, affects the educational investment, job satisfaction, wages and job mobility (Shujaat et al., 2009). The suitability of a study field offered by the educational and training institutions should meet the current requirements of the employer or the job market in order to ensure the program is recognized by all parties. Bracey (2006) stated that it is difficult to know the suitable skills required by employers in the industry. Therefore, the employer should cooperate with the educational institution parties in providing information related to the educational world.
Conclusion

Effective skills training will produce graduates who are educated and skillful before entering the working field. Besides, it will also produce graduates with a good working ethics, proactive and able to solve problems related to the work. A graduate is selected to fulfill a post because the employer believes that the individual has a better knowledge and working skills as compared to other candidates. Pang (2011) mentioned that there are three primary strategies to construct an integrated human workforce, which are by:

i) restructuring the educational system in order to increase the students’ achievements

ii) increasing the graduates’ skills in order to increase the marketability of the graduates, and

iii) restructuring the labour market system in order to develop Malaysia as a high-income nation

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