



## Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Employability Skills for TVET Graduates in Malaysia

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### Structured Abstract

#### Design/methodology/approach:

The paper opted for a document analysis on academic journal articles published by scholars in line with topic of sustainable employability skills, TVET graduates quality and engineering education.

#### Purpose:

The paper aims to identify key elements of sustainable employability skills for TVET graduates in Malaysia. It proposes modelling the combination of basic skills which includes foundation skills and technical skills and generic skills which is high order thinking skills and personal quality. The study aims to provide proof of concept based on literature discussion.

#### Findings:

The paper provides conceptual framework what are four important skills to be honed by TVET graduates for their sustainable employability skills. It is found that foundation skills, technical skills, high order thinking skills and personal quality are important elements in sustainable employability skills. These skills will be able to differentiate them with other competitors to stay relevant in market despite various challenges face either internal or external.

#### Originality/value:

This paper fulfills the concept of definition sustainable employability skills. The elements defined in the concept will be able to assist in identification and classification of sub-elements to further enhance the building of framework in sustainable employability skills for TVET graduates.

### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

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Malaysia has expressed a vision to achieve a High-Income Nation since 1991 and one of the required criteria is the development of human capital. Since then, Malaysia is actively focusing on the initiative and set out in national policies such as the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (11MP), Industry 4.0 Policy and TVET 4.0 Framework. In a report by the World Bank in 2014, it shows that highly skilled workers can be produced through education especially in the field of Technical and Vocational Education & Training (TVET). Therefore, one of the important measures is to ensure that

graduates in Malaysia are equipped with competent skills. This problem may be observed in the fact that the country's unemployment rate is rising from 3% to 4.7 percent in August 2020. Graduates' employability skills are one of the most important criteria in addressing manpower need. TVET institutions must guarantee that its graduates are prepared to enter the workforce and satisfy the demands of the industry. Thus, the purpose of this concept paper is to discuss and propose a conceptual framework of sustainable employability skills. This study uses the literature review method from previous studies. This study is intended to contribute to the development of the notion of sustainable employability skills in TVET education, which will aid in the development of positive human capital.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Framework, Employability, Sustainable Employability Skills, Human Capital Development, TVET, Education 4.0.

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia must provide a workforce equipped with a high level of cognitive and socio-behavioural skills to meet the demands of a fast-growing industry. It is important to ensure that the country has a sufficient dynamic workforce to be able to respond creatively to rapid economic changes, the emergence of new technologies and also to face the influence of globalization from international competitors. Furthermore, the rapid development of technology which is currently in the phase of Industrial Revolution 4 (Industry 4.0) presents new challenges to continue to ensure that Malaysia can achieve the desired progress. Therefore, human capital development should not be taken lightly or Malaysia will face difficulties in achieving high-income nation status.

Factors of human capital and skilled manpower development are often closely related to employability skills especially among graduates, career development, and individual success in employment (Bejakovi, 2014; Guo et al., 2012). In this sense, it refers to the success of human capital development fostered at the level of higher educational institutions (HEIs) until graduates successfully find employment within a specific time frame. (Mohd Azri, Azyani; Sahid, Sheerad; A. Hamid, 2019; Norman et al., 2017; Zakaria, Hamzah; Nasroddin, Saidatul Nizan; Hashim, 2015). Thus, in general, employability skills are not only a catalyst for graduates to secure an employment, but it also required as ongoing skills for individuals to constantly improve self-skills, gain career success or be able to adapt to change despite changes that led to outside of their area of expertise (Fernandez-Chung & Ching, 2018; Hillage & Pollard, 1999; Zaharim & Omar, 2010).

Based on data released by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Malaysia has produced 260 thousand graduates in various levels ranging from Certificate to the Ph.D. level for the year of 2020 (MoHE, 2021). A breakdown of this number, a total of 156 thousand people (60%) managed to get a job, 47 thousand people (17.8%) continued their studies, 5 thousand people (2%) improved their skills, 12 thousand people (4.6%) were waiting for work placement and 40 thousand people (15.6%) are still looking for jobs. From the percentage of those who are unemployed, the percentage is at a high level, where it has increased compared to 13.8 percent in 2019. This is worsened by the unemployment rate in Malaysia which recorded the highest value of 5.3 percent in May 2020 ( Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). According to

benchmarks released by the International Labor Organization (ILO), countries that reach full employment must have an unemployment rate of less than 4 percent. Based on these data, it can be proved that there is a problem of skills mismatch between graduates and industry needs. This situation is explained by Suarta et al., (2017), stated that the graduates produced by each HEIs must fulfil the industry's skill requirements. By acquiring the necessary skills for the industry, it enables graduates to make a significant impact on the industry and self-development in career progress. On the other hand, if graduates do not have the required skills, they have to learn and gain experience from scratch again where it impacts the high cost of the industry to provide training but unable to maximize job production. Therefore, the issue of mismatch or gap between industry and graduates must be addressed immediately (Ali et al., 2020). This study supports a questionnaire conducted by the OECD in 2019 as shown in Figure 1 which shows a comparison of employee inequality in Malaysia compared to developed countries.

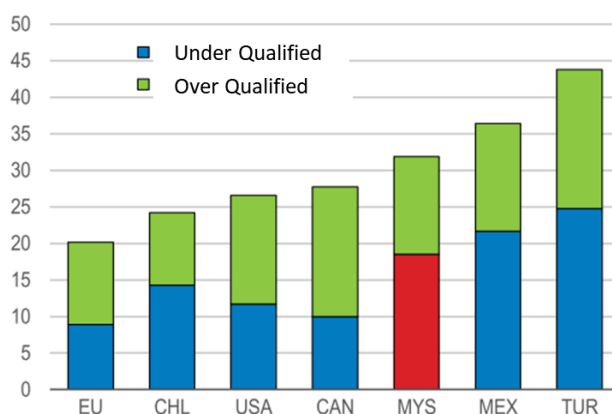


Figure 1. Comparison of Employee Inequality

Furthermore, the Department of Statistics Malaysia announced that the unemployment rate was increased sharply from an average of 3.25 per cent since 2000-2019 to 5.3 per cent in May 2020 as shown in Figure 2. This increase was due to the spread of coronavirus outbreak (COVID- 19) which is attacking all over the world and Malaysia is no exception. To curb the spread of this epidemic, the Movement Control Order (MCO) measures implemented starting March 18, 2020, caused the economic and social landscape to change immediately. Business activities had to be closed and not allowed to operate, especially for non-basic category sectors such as tourism and services including construction activities. As a result of this, some business owners have had to choose the path of closing their businesses as a result of being severely affected and incurring losses. As a result, dumping of workers who have been laid off or forced to be laid off. This impacts on high competition in the job search race from existing employees and recent graduates entering the world of work.

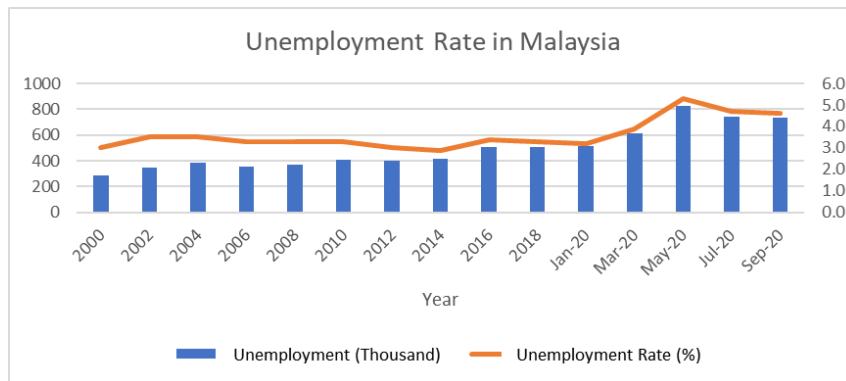


Figure 2. Unemployment Rate in Malaysia 2000-2020. Source: Dept. Of Statistic (2020)

Industry 4.0 and COVID-19 essentially reshape the job landscape and foster a significant reaction to how industrial workers conduct their jobs and how employers scrutinize selecting graduates to accept as employees where only high-quality graduates with specific skills according to the employer's wishes will be taken as an employee. Technical and Vocational Education & Training (TVET) is aimed to produce skilled workers where graduates are master in basic, technical, scientific knowledge, working competencies and positive personal qualities (UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure graduates particularly in TVET to possess diverse skills that coincide with the needs of the industry. Hence, this study aims to build a conceptual framework of employability skills that graduates must possess before joining the workforce. This initial preparation is important to ensure that graduates can meet the needs of the industry and compete hand-in-hand in securing jobs. These strong factors showing important evidence to look through for solutions. Key to the future is now and changes are required to be detailed out. Particular skills need to ensure instil in the graduates so that it could meet the demand of industry for long period of time.

## ELEMENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK

### Foundation Skills

Underpinning of working experience, academic excellent and intellectual skills are very important where these are categorized as the foundation skills. The skills are vital for the graduates to understand each concept and theory related to their specialized knowledge (Murali, 2014). Hence, TVET graduates will need to acquire the skills first, which will then, facilitate their mental skills and practical skills to be used on-the-job for each of their specialized area. There are several objectives to acquire foundation skills; firstly, to gain knowledge of academic subjects of the field related. The TVET graduates are required to understand each theory and its concept. This will assist to develop intellectual understanding and will be able to put the concept in practical application. As the result, the graduates will be able to comprehend the importance of upgrading their skills either within the classroom or in the working environment in the future. This notion is critical not just in the near term, but also in the long run. A continuous learning process either in the same field or extension to other fields will exponentiate the employee's capability and competency, especially in career progression. This skill is highly preferred by employers as shown in study by Chhinzer & Russo (2018) and Rahmat et al. (2018) where it showed that the employer value an individual's engagement in their own learning proactively.

Secondly, TVET graduates must be assessed on their theoretical academic knowledge in order to guarantee that they retain a strong recollection of what they have studied and do not struggle to grasp the practical application of TVET skills. This plays an important role where it is differentiated by one another. Graduates may possess excellence results in the examination slip, but the application of knowledge on the field may show differently. Findings by Mustafa Bakray (2019) supported this point where employers provided feedback that the application of knowledge in the field is far more important than the grade results. However, they also agreed that graduates with low-graded results possess difficulties both in examination and practical work. Hence, as employer, they are preferred with graduates who able to perform practical jobs on the field.

### **Technical Skills**

TVET graduates are encouraged to participate actively in practical and technical work that applies the academic principles and theoretical concepts learned in class. This technique will help them convert their transitive knowledge into usable practical knowledge. This will improve their cognitive abilities since they will be more familiar with the equipment they will be using once they enter the workforce. It also will improve their motor skills as well as equipment handling and understanding as machines used in the field are far more variety and complex compared to what they have learn in learning institutions. As suggested by Hanapi, (2015), basic skills, design, installation, testing, and maintenance skills are five major parts of technical skills needed of graduates. These skills are comprehensive covering the majority of engineering fields.

The exercise is crucial since the majority of engineering job is extremely practical. It requires the ability to quickly transfer theoretical understanding to actual application using the technical equipment they will be operating. Furthermore, it gives an ample time for graduates to familiarize with tools and machines before work on the real-life situation, where the risk may be greater if they were the first time to handle the equipment. The graduates will have all of the fundamental abilities needed to handle their professions properly and will be in a better position to learn more advanced skills as a result of this objective.

Similar to academic achievement where graduates will undergo an assessment, practical and technical skills also require the same process. Practical skills will be evaluated and graded so that they may understand their strengths and shortcomings and know which areas they need to improve in order to be more effective. Although some positions in engineering fields do not require the employee to perform the job but having the technical skills required, is an advantage for the employee to excel further in their career.

### **High Order Thinking Skills**

The main objective in high order thinking skills is to gain intellectual skills. Intellectual skills in this context are not limited to academic performance, but it is the skills that are highly required in graduates with the element of critical thinking, problem solving, learning skills, management skills and decision-making. These skills are required to determine strategy, resolve a problem, conduct a project or analyze an opportunity to merge it into the daily work routine. It is the process where employee experience a development phase to understand the required task.

The complexity of practical and technical work often unpredictable and determine high order thinking skills to put academic knowledge, technical skills and hands on experience together. These combinations require high cognitive level ability to be able to relate one another. Understanding of current knowledge and the application of the knowledge for the job on the field and analytical skills in assessing and solving problems in carrying out tasks provided.

The objectives that will exhibit the accomplishment of this goal is to gain all sub-elements of high order thinking skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, learning skills, management skills and decision-making. TVET graduates will need to have their thinking skills to be trained and brush up in order to be able to link sub-elements together. The graduates will be more prepared on how to take up a role and responsibility as an employee. As a result, the graduates will be able to contribute fruitful thoughts and ideas to enhance the success of himself as well as a contribution back to the company. These combinations showing a sign of maturity in the development of cognitive skills.

### The Personal Quality

Another important factor in the labor market as each graduate student needs to possess basic personal quality inclusive professional skills and positive skills trait. This includes communication skills, personal presentation skills, leadership skills, visioning skills, goal-setting skills and self-assessment skills. The objectives that will show the accomplishment of this goal is when graduates able to possess positive skills trait where the graduates could complement their soft skills with hard skills together. This will result in confidence and preparedness of handling an interview session upon approval of a job position.

As similar to other skills, personal quality requires practice in the classroom. In order to improve the art of professional quality, the graduate will need to practice acquired abilities on a daily basis. This will be accomplished by expecting them to speak professionally with one another and to utilize actual situations in the classroom for graduates to complete. Every graduate will be able to achieve a high degree of confidence in using these professional abilities on a regular basis as a result of this exercise. Additionally, the graduate will be able to master these abilities and able to explain them fluently.

Practical assessment will further enhance their ability to determine their strengths and limitations in the application of professional skills. One of the assessments might be how they manage verbal interview questions or, for example, a customer complaint. This evaluation will be rated, and they will be told which areas they need to improve on in the future. As a result of this evaluation, students will have a better understanding of how their professional abilities are progressing and how to continue to improve them.

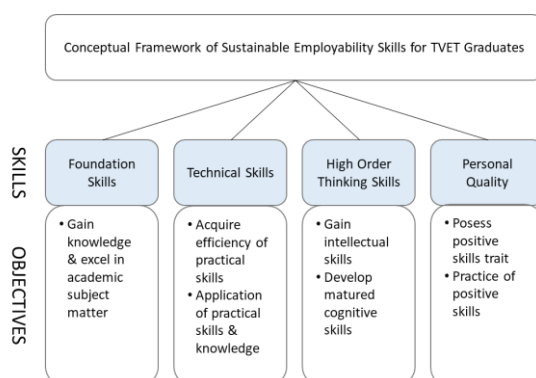


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework of Sustainability Skills for TVET Graduates

## DISCUSSION OF THE FRAMEWORK

### Employability Skills

Based on the context of education, employability has been defined as employment of graduates, graduates that continue studies, graduates who are undergoing skills development training and graduates are awaiting job placement (MOHE, 2021). Several other scholars given definitions of employability as to enhance the context of understanding of the term 'employability'.

Makhbul et al. (2015) defined employability skills and generic skills as key competencies or required skills for students to possess the ability to secure the job.

Murali (2014) highlighted, definition by Harvey (2001) as a process of learning where an individual will equip a new level of experience and will continue to grow themselves via skills and experience as learning process throughout their employment years. On the other perspective, Murali also highlighted, the definition by Bernston (2008) as perception of a person towards their own capability of getting a new, better or equal employment opportunity.

These definitions of employability can be concluded, as something to do with the people's acknowledgment as they remain productive in their particular occupations, whether or not they are being paid well. Also, it is concerned with the capacity to not only use existing skills and information, but also to acquire a much higher degree of skills and knowledge in an expanding environment where challenges are offered to help individuals reach their full potential. Employability promotes long-term growth, development, and advancement in the face of hardship.

### **Sustainable Employability Skills in TVET**

Sustainable development is often related to environment and continuity of resources or how it considers the effects of organizational activity for material and physical resources. Similarly on social sustainability, it considers on activities that affect people's behavior, physical, mental-health and well-being. However, in this paper, we are discussing about sustainable employability where the development of skills and knowledge required by graduates to ensure they are able to secure jobs and sustain in the market. van der Klink et al. (2016) summarized that work or employment is an important means of achieving goals and values of generating income. On the other hand, they also argued that workers are required to value outcomes from their work rather than an income alone, where it will translate that their employability is sustainable if they can possess additional values. Additional values are a variety of skills that benefit not only the company or workplace, but also to human development either towards the employee or other colleagues.

Furthermore, De Vos et al., (2020) highlighted despite various studies and researches towards sustainable employability, there is still a lack of a broad and well-defined theoretical framework that enables for a grounded empirical research of this topic. They have looked into the perspective of HRM policies (De Vos & Van der Hijden, 2017), aging and motivation (Akkermans et al., 2016), learning agility (Anseel, 2017), sustainable employability for mothers (Herman and Lewis, 2012), individuals with a disability (Baldrige and Kulkarni, 2017) and also from the perspective of work-life balance relationship (Kossek, Valcour and Lirio, 2014).

With these points, we use the term "sustainable employability" to drive through the discussion and focus on values in the concept of employability. This concept will be focused on TVET graduates and in relation towards their sustainable employability skills. TVET is well known on its industry-based curriculum where students are prepared with relevant skills and knowledge as well as working skills for future jobs. Researches shown that TVET has substantially proven to be more adaptive towards industry's demand (Jamaludin et al., 2018). High unemployment rates, growing skills mismatch gaps, changing industry needs, increasing skilled skills migration and emergence of new skills needs as a result of continued globalization effects and the introduction of new technologies have contributed to this trend (Comyn, 2018). These factors have led to increased changes in national TVET education reform in skills development and increased awareness around the world on the need for occupational skills development and lifelong learning (OECD, 2017). This is proven by the development of policies produced, which related to the development of job skills within the nation or globally.

Additionally, TVET also recognized as a solution for lack of sustainable development and reducing poverty (Minghat & Yasin, 2010).

### **How It Works**

The four main goals of this framework are to gain: foundation skills, technical skills, high order thinking skills and personal quality. In order to achieve these skills, the education system of engineering, especially in TVET needs to be frequently update with the latest technology and development based on the industry needs. Technology and engineering are constantly changing and developing; hence the new knowledge needs to be passed on to the students through their curriculum.

The students need to strengthen their academic skills to acquire the basic and extended theoretical knowledge as the foundation which are better gained in a viable company. This should be done as early as possible when the student begins their first semester. This will improve their practical experience and also enhance their understanding of theoretical knowledge. An assessment should be carried out to analyze their progress and improvement. The assessment should be done by lecturers and tutors or coordinators at the workplace.

Technology development is constantly changing and require high adaptability to learn and conquer the latest technology. This shows the significant of keeping up with industrial technology and ensuring students are aware on required technology and its technical skills. Sharing experience session, practical research and site visits to various industry providing awareness and knowledge to students with updated technology that currently being used. These initiatives will better prepare students with current technology and giving them an opportunity to equip themselves with necessary skills. These exercises will also help in building analytical skills, problem solving and decision making.

The job market requires individuals to be able to work with high human interactions regardless either from other colleagues and other stakeholders. This translates to the importance of teamwork, communication skills as well as emotion intelligence (EQ). One way to enhance these skills is by conducting a soft skills training with both theoretical and practical approach to further improve the student's ability rather than just giving them a lecture about it. Practical assessment and the continuous improvement process will further strengthen their skills and ability where they continue applying these skills in the manner in which they are bringing themselves throughout their study years.

### **CONCLUSION**

Employability skills could be enhanced, starts from the classroom especially for vocational students. With proper supervision and tools, every graduate student has the capacity to develop high academic and practical vocational abilities. This should begin with high note motivation by integrating a futuristic view on their objectives and goals. Secondly, lecturers should provide a thorough information on the current developments in the labor market, engineering fields, industry and companies. This will act as a direction indicator for each student to develop their career map in achieving high quality skills and experience as well as to enhance employability opportunity. They should understand the core concept of human capital and its demand and supply reaction which affecting limitations of hiring graduate students and be encouraged to plan and execute strategic initiatives to tackle these limitations.

Getting into the job market can make one feel insecure and nervous if they are not confident in their skills. The situation will get worst if they could not understand the whole picture or barely understand the basic experience required for this process. Early preparation and adjustment are a good way to kick-start and will be able to assist them to maneuver in the highly competitive labor market.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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