

## **Undergraduate Awareness and Readiness Towards Employability: The Significance of English**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the undergraduate awareness and readiness towards employability attributes with a specific reference to English Language competency. A sampling of final year students from various faculties at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) were at randomly selected and focus group interviews were conducted with each group of faculty students. The findings unravel respondents' beliefs and attitude and level of awareness towards employability and significance of English Language. The findings also highlight undergraduates' readiness towards employability in general. It has also significantly contributed to an emerging profile of UKM undergraduates as prospective employees. This profiling is hoped to raise a level of awareness amongst the university stakeholders primarily to consider measures to be undertaken in bridging the gap between the university and the industry as a whole.

**Keywords:** *Undergraduate Awareness, Readiness, English Competency, Employability,*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The study on the Academic Achievements and Employability of Graduates in Institutions of Higher Learning (Morshidi et. al. 2004b) reveals that English language skills have significant effects on employability. The mastery of English is important to a graduate for employment, especially in the private sector. Feedback from local and international employers shows that verbal and written communication skills in English remain the most sought after attribute in prospective employees. (Sunday Star April 2011). It has been identified that a key reason for failure to be hired among Malaysian graduates is due to their lack of competence in English language (Berita Harian, March 4th 2002). In a survey conducted by Khairi Izwan (1993), it is discovered that firms found their employees did not possess sufficient communication skills in their interface with English speaking clients. Graduates' poor writing skills in reports, letters and minutes of meetings have resulted in extensive revision and further caused administrative delays and loss of time. He poses that graduates often face difficulty when communicating with English-speaking customers and due to this; the companies miss several business opportunities. He believes that low proficiency in English could hamper efforts in enhancing knowledge and participation in courses which are important for graduates' self development. It is therefore essential to develop English language skills, which can help graduates to sustain employability. A study carried out by the Alumni of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) on the employability of UKM graduates from 2006 -2008 has revealed that the UKM employability rate in multinational companies has decreased from 22.46 (2006) to 15.5 (2007), 14.3 (2008). A similar drop is also prevalent in local private sectors.

In the year 2007, it was found that unemployed graduates comprised of 8.73% from the Faculty of Science and Technology (563 graduates), 6.76% from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (436 graduates) and 4.37% from the Faculty of Economics and Management (282 graduates). Graduates from the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry had the highest rate of employment, 88.8% and 97.4% respectively. This is followed by Faculty of Allied Health Sciences and the Faculty of Engineering, 59.8% and 59.6% respectively. This clearly shows that UKM graduates' employability rate differs based on the faculty from which they graduate. This paper presents the UKM undergraduate awareness and readiness towards employability and significance of English. It unravels students' attitude and level of awareness towards job employment before they graduate and their beliefs and awareness towards their competency in English and its significance towards employability.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *Graduate Employment*

A self-assessment study conducted by Hamidah Yamat et.al (2002) between public universities reveal that in terms of language skills, only 55.3% of UKM students rated their level of competence as competent to speak in the language in comparison to 82.8% UiTM (University of Institute Technology MARA) students. Both groups of respondents considered that they are competent in listening skills as indicated by 75.3% UKM and 87.2% UiTM students' perception. 73.9% UKM and 87.8% UiTM students reported that they are also competent in reading skills. Only 64.7% of UKM and 80.3% of UiTM students felt that they are competent in writing skills. These results indicate that a substantial minority of the students considered themselves incompetent in the speaking and writing skills, i.e. the productive skills. Hamidah Yamat et.al (2002) indicates that students may be able to listen and read well; the receptive skills, but they are less able to use the language to develop and convey new knowledge. In other words, she believes that they are knowledgeable but due to their lack of language proficiency, they may fail to utilise or to impart and expand this knowledge. The lack of language proficiency, in this case English, may directly affect one's ability to communicate or express views, ideas and knowledge effectively. It suggests that the graduates are less competent in their productive skills, mainly speaking which leads one being a less competent communicator.

In a study by Morshidi Sirat et al (2010), they found that graduates' weakness in the English language is a key factor in graduate unemployment. This is supported by comments made by relevant parties in the industry such as the human resource managers, CEOs and Managerial staff who have made general comments when approached by the university that although graduates possess excellent results, they may lack the ability to communicate effectively. This they believe is due to the graduates' lack of confidence and poor command of English. Morshidi Sirat et al's study also shows that besides their lack of competence to speak well in English, graduates are not committed enough, not prepared to face challenges and not brave enough to take risks. The industry believes that our graduates have a good knowledge of higher order thinking skills, i.e. being analytical and critical but unable to project this knowledge during interviews.

These views indicate not only the lack in language competence but also their incompetence to apply the thinking skills needed to enable them to perform well at workplace. This indicates that poor command of the English language is not the only and main reason for low performance by these undergraduates at workplace. It evidently leads to a worthy note that undergraduates are still significantly less competent in the employability skills as a whole.

### *Employability Skills*

Outsourcing Malaysia (OM) chairman David Wong said a recent survey among 30 companies offering 220 jobs revealed that only 11% of the applicants were considered 'employable', adding that the respondents were members of OM. (Star Online, April 1, 2010). From the perspective of employers, 'employability'

often seems to refer to 'work-readiness', that is, possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will enable new graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives soon after commencing employment (Mason, G., Williams, G. & Cranmer, S., 2006). Skill is then defined as a set of characteristics that make a person employable, including knowledge, know-how, attitudes and behaviors (Norshima Zainal Shah, 2008). Under Employability Skills for the Future, employability skills are defined as the skills required to gain employment or establish an organization, but also to progress within an organization or expand employment capability, so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to an organization's strategic directions (DEST, 2002).

These employability skills are transferable core skill groups that also represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace (SCANS, 1991) as cited by Alston, A. J, et.al., (2009). Companies, regardless whether they are small, medium, or large, require employees who possess skills relevant to their employment and the ability to develop new skills to increase their value to the company. The skills and internal practices of a company can be taught but one needs to be proficient in English in order to learn. And this is what our graduates lack as most employers cited poor command of English among graduates as a reason for not hiring as reported in *The Star* (April 1, 2010). Employability skills are additional to technical or academic skills and are required by all employers and across all organizations. Employability from the perspective of Higher Education Institutions is therefore about producing graduates who are capable and able, and these have impacts upon all areas of university life, in terms of the delivery of academic programmes and extra-curricular activities (Khaled Nordin, 2009).

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

In order to study in detail the related issues and to unravel the causes of the statement of problem addressed in this study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied. The primary data was collected through 1) focus group interviews 2) email interviews and 3) face to face interviews. Since this paper is presenting the partial findings of a research project (Othman et.al, 2010), the data is focused on responses gathered through the student focus group interview.

#### **1. The Subject Respondents**

An at random sampling of third year (final year) UKM students was approached to voluntarily participate as respondents. The respondents composite about 23 students from five different faculties – FST (Faculty of Science & Technology), FTSM (Faculty of Information Science & Technology), FEP (Faculty of Economics), FPI (Faculty of Islamic Studies), and FSSK (Faculty of Social Sciences). Table 1.0 shows the details of the focus group interviews with the student respondent.

Table 1.0: Details of Student Respondents

No	Faculty	No of Students	Gender	Race
1	FSSK (Faculty of social sciences and Humanities)	2	2 Male	Malay
2	FPI (Faculty of Islamic Studies)	4	4 Female	Malay
3	FTSM (Faculty of Information Science and Technology)	2	2 Male	Chinese
4	FEP (Faculty of Economics and Business)	1	1 Female	Malay
5	FST&FEP (Faculty of Science and Technology) & (Faculty of Economics and Business)	2	1 Female & 1 Male	Malay & Chinese
6	FPI (Faculty of Islamic Studies)	1	1 Male	Malay
7	FST (Faculty of Science and Technology)	2	1 Female & 1 Male	Malay
8	FST (Faculty of Science and Technology)	1	1 Female	Malay
9	FSSK (Faculty of social sciences and Humanities)	3	3 Female	Malay
10	FTSM (Faculty of Information Science and Technology)	2	2 Female	Malay
11	FTSM & FEP (Faculty of Information Science and Technology) & (Faculty of Economics and Business)	3	2 Female & 1 Male	Malay
	TOTAL	23	15 Female 8 Male	20 Malays 3 Chinese

The number of respondents targeted were initially at 25 to 30 students but the number who actually turned up for the interview was in total 23 students. From the table above, one can see the breakdown of the student respondents that comprises both gender and race of the Malay and Chinese students. The number of Malay students tops the total number of student population in UKM. This is followed by the Chinese students and the Indians with a ratio of roughly 3:2:1 in general.

A brief reflection on the sampling of respondents was noted as this study was carried out. The researchers had planned to conduct several focus group interviews with 3rd year students in groups of 5 from 5 selected faculties which have the lowest rate of employable graduates. We grouped the respondents according to their faculty and the interviews were conducted by two researchers.

However, there were some respondents who were interviewed in smaller groups to suit students' availability since they were occupied with their final exams or meeting supervisors regarding their final thesis.

The interviews with smaller groups of respondents were conducted by one researcher. In total, we interviewed 23 respondents in 11 separate interviews. More interview sessions were conducted than what we had planned due to the small number of respondents. An additional matter to note is that most respondents interviewed during the FGI session were scheduled intentionally for those who come from the same faculty as they would have gone through the same faculty programme and activities. This was a measure taken to ensure validity and reliability of data.

## 2. Methods of data collection

For the purpose of this paper, the method will focus on that of the focus group interview.

### a. Focus group interview

The interview sessions required planning and organization. The respondents for the interview had to be on volunteer basis to ensure that there was no feeling of resentment. The student respondents were chosen from the classes taught by the researchers. There was no problem in getting them to volunteer for the interview. During the interview sessions, some students were nervous and the researcher cum the interviewer needed to create a less formal ambience by establishing further rapport. The researcher ensured the students that the interview session was to get their personal opinions in which they could do in English or in Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and that their responses would be confidential. They were informed that their names will be anonymous in writing the report. This made them feel more comfortable and as on the part of the researcher, we were more convinced that the responses would be those of genuine response. There were students who indicated that they were nervous as it was their first experience to be interviewed and they thought that they had to respond in English only. The fact that they were allowed to answer in either language; English or Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) made them feel more at ease. As for the language instructors and lecturers, a letter of invitation was sent to them in getting their participation and cooperation in the project.

In conducting the focus group interviews with the students, the researchers were faced with a slight problem of scheduling the interview time. This may be a familiar dilemma when dealing with students respondents studying at tertiary level due to their tight schedule and co curricula involvement amongst many other college activity matters. We had to consider the respondents' schedule in order to plan and conduct the interviews.

## 3. Method of Analysis

A verbatim transcription was done for the purpose of content analysis. Since the interview questions were categorically coded based on several aspects such as respondents' language skills, attitudes and attributes and factors contributing to UKM students' low employability rate, the responses were analysed accordingly. A slight reflection on the analysis of data, there was a slight difficulty in ensuring accurate transcribing. Due to some minor hiccups in the recordings and or respondents' unclear articulation, the researchers were faced with slight difficulty in transcribing small parts of the recordings. This however, did not hinder researchers' comprehension of the respondents' discourse.

The data was presented in a table excel sheet form that was sectionalized under the different codes of categories based on the interview questions that were semi structured. Each student response was noted down and the researchers made sure that no data was left behind. This was seen as a crucial measure that the researchers gave considerable attention so that we obtain a wider and genuine scope of responses. Thus, any least response was treated equally significant. The verbatim transcription was found to be useful as it facilitated the researchers to quantify the frequencies of similar responses in drawing up discussions and conclusions.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

This section presents the findings gathered from the interview data. The findings and discussion are presented accordingly.

1. Beliefs and Attitude
2. Awareness towards Attributes of Employability
3. Awareness towards Proficiency and Knowledge
4. Awareness towards their Language Skills
5. Awareness towards University Courses
6. Respondent Recommendation

Abbreviated form of each faculty is used as the followings to facilitate reader to follow the discussion.

- FST (Faculty of Science & Technology)
- FTSM (Faculty of Information Science & Technology)
- FEP (Faculty of Economics)
- FPI (Faculty of Islamic Studies),

- FSSK (Faculty of Social Sciences)

### ***Beliefs and Attitude***

#### *Finding jobs after leaving University*

Most of the respondents ( 9 out of 23) expressed their intentions mainly to research on job opportunities at government sectors and this is most expressed by students from the Islamic Faculty (4 students). Sending in resume or to make attempts to fill application forms is students' next preferable mean (8 out of 23). This is followed by an alternative job search via internet (6) and 6 respondents plan to set up own businesses and a common preferable option expressed by the Islamic Faculty (FPI) students was to apply as temporary sit-in teachers. A rather large number of respondents (7) expressed intentions to pursue studies and these responses came from those from FPI (Islamic Faculty), FEP (Business Faculty) and FSSK (Social Sciences Faculty) faculties. This appears as the third most favourite response from the respondents other than filling application forms and sending their resumes in. Interestingly, none of respondents from the FST (Science and Technology) and FTSM (Information Technology) faculties expressed intentions to pursue studies. About three respondents expressed intentions in isolation expressed intentions to go for a walk in application, listen to career talk and attempt to be involved as lecturers at universities as their immediate action to seek job opportunities.

#### *Job application that relates to their discipline*

As to whether graduates would focus only on jobs that they have been trained for, six (6) students from the Faculties of Social Sciences (FSSK), Information Technology (FTSM) and Business Economy (FEP) said 'no'. They felt that the choices should not be rigid as few FTSM students believed that their field of study provides wider job opportunity. Thirteen (13) respondents from FSSK, FTSM, FEP and FPI also responded that students find it not necessary that their job application should relate to their discipline of study. They commented that they would not be choosy and had also expressed intentions to alternatively focus on entrepreneurship. Those students (3) from the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST), however seem to feel they should strictly apply for jobs that relate to their disciplines. One student respondent answer was not however, applicable to the question asked.

#### *Readiness for job interview*

When the respondents were asked on their preparation and readiness for job interviews, most stated the various preparations when called for interviews. They listed the followings as the steps they would take prior to the interview.

- Research on company's background
- Self prepare / self initiate

- Research on job specification
- Seek advice/opinions/tips from seniors

We recorded twenty six (26) responses from respondents that self preparation / self initiation is a priority where one should equip oneself with current issues / general knowledge and to attend English courses. A number of respondents expressed several preparations. They are listed as in Table 2.0.

Table 2.0 List of Actions for Self Preparatory

	List of Actions	No of Res
1	Equip oneself with current issues/general knowledge (local and global)	8
2	Attend English language courses	3
3	To improve grammar	1
4	Attend other language courses	1
5	Seek sample interview questions and tips online	3
6	Equip oneself with relevant softskills	2
7	Develop self confidence	2
8	Practice speaking English/answering interview questions	4
9	Appearance	4

Eight responses on researching company background were gathered which is next favourable plan of action. Other than that one respondent expressed that one should initiate to seek sample of interview questions and online tips. Respondents also mentioned about practicing to speak English / to answer interview questions as well as to pay attention on appearance. They specified that the faculties could hold a graduate training as well as putting up announcements or notices on job vacancies.

#### *Alternative Plans*

Respondents were also asked of their plans or if they fail to secure any jobs applied and being unemployed for a certain period of time. Below is what the respondents perceived as their alternatives.

- Part time job / Freelance

- Take courses / language courses
- Pursue their Masters Study
- Set up small businesses

Most responses (7) focus on students' perceived intentions to take up part time job or do freelancing jobs. They mention jobs such as teacher / tutor, cashiers or clerks. Another popular response is to pursue their Masters study. About six (responses) were noted for intention to further pursue to post graduate level and majority (4) came from those students from the Faculty of Social Sciences. There is one respondent who is uncertain and one who is bond by scholarship and thus the question is irrelevant to her.

### ***Awareness towards Attributes of Employability***

#### *Attributes that employers look for in recruitment*

The responses in this section are worth to note as they indicate students' beliefs of attributes as those that employers look for. They have listed as the followings:

- Aptitudes (knowledge / qualifications)
- Personality
- Skills
- Generic / soft skills
- Enduring stress
- Willingness to learn
- Upgrade one's knowledge and professionalism
- Ability to perform and execute one's duty at workplace task

Majority of the responses (20) were recorded so as to rank soft skills as most important among those listed above. Ten (10) stated communication skills as the most favourable respons and these responses came from respondents from all respective faculties. About only four (4) responses gathered, specifically mentioned English as an attribute that employers would focus on. Thirteen responses (13) that stated soft skills and generic skills as significant attributes were recorded. They listed the followings as skills they believe are what are referred as the soft /generic skills.

- Able to work in group
- Confidence
- Innovative/Creative
- Leadership

The most responses (7) recorded focused on confidence.

#### *Cuurent Attributes*

There is a positive response towards whether the respondents believe they have such attributes that they perceive employers look for. Eight (8) respondents believe they have the attributes that employers look for while four (4) respondents did not think so. The FTSM respondents expressed their confidence of having the communication skills while four (4) responses said they have the attribute of a team player. This is different however, with regard to those respondents from the FPI faculty as majority of them (3) believe that they lack the communication skills inclusive of one respondent from FSSK and one from the FST. Adding on, a couple of FEP students feel impartial about this but expressed the need to improve their English proficiency.

#### *Acquired Attributes at University*

On the whole, there is a good indication that the respondents (33 responses) believe that they have acquired such attributes in UKM. A high response (11) was recorded that students believe they have acquired such attributes from mainly through the English workshops held by faculties or colleges. Only five (5) responses were recorded to say 'no' and these responses came from majority (4) the FTSM students. They also state that these attributes are also gained through college activities, course assignments, co-curricular, faculty programmes and one response relates to industrial training. A lower number of a less positive response inform that they acquire the attributes through own initiative or learn from experience. There is also a comment that the attributes are gained through their working experience.

#### *Low employability due to low level of proficiency*

Majority of the respondents (14) are agreeable that the low employability rate amongst the university graduates is due to their low level of proficiency. There is a strong indication that respondents believe low proficiency in English is one attributing factor to failure to secure a job. They also made a claim that as most companies in Malaysia use English, it is challenging for UKM graduates to be employed. About seven (7) respondents however did not agree to this statement. Responses that indicate students' disagreement on this matter unravel a number of students' comments that the graduates themselves may have been choosy'. They further believed that the quality of UKM students has declined, due to soft skills, and that University courses are too general and not specialized. Those (2) who were indecisive mentioned however that the low employability rate would depend on the job requirement that has no relevance to their field of study.

#### *Awareness towards Proficiency and Knowledge*

##### *Student rating scale of their English proficiency*

About thirteen (13) respondents rated their level of proficiency 4 to 5 on a scale of 1 to 10 with scale 10 being the best. Though some students (7) rate their

level between 5 and 6, they still feel that there is still a lot to improve and to learn. They believed that they still have yet to build the confidence when speaking. Some claim that they are good at reading but average in speaking. Only three (3) rated themselves at level 1 and 2 and they come from FSSK and FPI; the Social Sciences and Islamic Faculties.

#### *Student awareness on the importance of being proficient in English*

Most of the respondents (18) indicate the importance to be proficient in English to be in the range of important to very important. English is very important according to them due to the fact that English is an international language, a need for their career. As for FTSM students, English is needed to handle IT gadgets, to read documents written in English in both private and government sectors. The FPI students express that English is also needed for religious purpose for 'dakwah'. They also state that English is important because of its position as an international working language. Most companies local and abroad use English and is important for communication. They emphasised the need to at least know how to speak and write basic English. Only one respondent says that English is not really that important as there is also the need to know other languages such as Mandarin.

#### *Being proficient in English is the most important factor*

While a high response (15) says that 'yes', being proficient in English is the most important factor there were those (5) who believe English is not the most important factor. They state other factors to be more important such as soft-skill, communications, confidence and the readiness to learn. There is a comment that says one can get a job without English.

#### *Comparison of Student English proficiency from other universities*

Most of the respondents (13) agree that there is a difference. They believe that these students' English is much better than theirs as most of the courses and assignments and thesis are written in English. This applies to both public universities like IIUM, UM, UITM, USIM, USM, UPSI and private university. Some say that there is no difference as they seem to think that UKM students' level of English is parallel to UM, UPM, USM, UNIMAS and UMS. There is also a comment that these students from other universities also use Manglish.

#### *Awareness towards their Language Skills*

##### *Strength / weakness among the four language skills*

Responses show that in general all respondents from all the faculties except for FPI believe that their strength lies in writing and reading (8 responses). They see themselves to be more average in reading whilst many (14) comment

that they are weak in speaking especially those students from FPI, the Faculty of Islam.

#### *How has the University helped develop proficiency skills*

A high response (15 respondents) shows positive that UKM has helped students develop these skills. One of the justifications is due to the English courses. They have also stated that other than the English course, other events such as content courses where reference is in English, ESZ ( about 50%) seminars, lectures, text books and assignments in English has to a certain extent assisted this. The FSSK students however, indicated that the university has not helped to develop these skills as they claim that their assignments are all in Malay and that lecturers are bilingual. Also the ESZ ( English Speaking Zone), which has been carried out in student residential colleges has not been taken up seriously by the student residents themselves.

#### *Ranked skills according to importance*

Most of the responses (16) show that speaking is ranked as the most important which is followed by writing where its importance is parallel to listening. The least important is the reading. Students also express other elements such as communication, self impression, leaderships, ICT skills and content knowledge as important.

#### *Measures to improve students' proficiency in English*

The students feel that the lecturers themselves should be proficient in English and that lecturers should use English and not mixed language. There is also a comment from an FPI student to have a foreign lecturer. As for UKM administration, a high response show that courses in UKM should be conducted in English. Students also feel that English should be made a compulsory subject and students need to take English every semester and to also provide more English courses throughout students' study period. An additional suggestion that shows a rather high response is to have more activities in English such as English Day and English week.

#### *Awareness towards University Courses*

##### *English classes give better chance for students to be employed*

A rather high response (11) says 'yes' that the English courses at the university have helped the students and improve confidence level. And as for those who took foundation course, this course has helped elevate students' confidence. FPI students indicated that the courses have helped boost their level of confidence. One response from a student who took the new English courses claim that Workplace Communication course has helped a 100%. A couple of

FSSK students and FPI says that the English courses taken have either helped them minimally or none at all.

*Soft skills courses in UKM give better chance for students to be employed*

A high of the response (17) indicates that students feel that the university courses have not helped them to enrich their soft skills with a very small response (2) said 'yes' and the rest were unsure. These students claim that they gain soft skills from college activities and faculty programmes / courses.

***Recommendations***

*To Improve English*

Students responded with a list of suggestions. One of the many that is most top ranked is to have seminar / career talk. Some other activities listed include:

- a. The English Speaking Zone at faculties
- b. Industrial training
- c. Enhancing soft skills
- d. Enhance communication skills
- e. Entrepreneurship
- f. Mock interviews
- g. Coursework and presentation, Student Exchange Programme

*To improve soft skills*

Majority of the respondents are agreeable that the university could help through a more exposure to enhance soft skills and the practice of internships and in enhancing students' communication skills. Students also suggest if UKM could help provide students with job employability and marketability preparatory course. Other than these suggestions, students also suggest activities that could raise student awareness of the significance of English. There is also a suggestion that content courses should be in English.

**5. DISCUSSION**

The investigation has firstly identified that the respondents are aware that they need to search for job opportunities once they graduate. They however display a mind set of finding jobs at government organizations, especially those from the Islamic faculty. And significantly, they have intentions to start up own businesses and pursuing their studies. These intentions would in a way affect the low employability rate of UKM students after graduating. The document of the Alumni of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) on the employability of UKM

graduates from 2006 -2008 seems to prove the declining employability rate especially so in multinational companies has decreased from 22.46 (2006) to 15.5 (2007), 14.3 (2008). The possibility of a further declined rate can be expected as the attitude and beliefs of these undergraduates seem to move towards setting up own businesses or pursuing their studies. With this trend it is expected lesser students would attempt the multi- national companies. This is followed by the fact that the respondents did no mentioning of applying or working for multi-national companies as many expressed intentions to work with the government. To add on, majority of the respondents were not overly concerned about the need to seek for job opportunities that relate to their field of study except for those from the Faculty of Science and Technology. This explains why the number of employability rate is to certain extent higher with the FST graduates amongst the university graduate population.

As with regard to their readiness for job interviews, the respondents are mostly aware of the necessary preparations like background company research or job specifications, etc but they are listed in isolation by individual respondents rather than all criteria to be interdependently significant. The respondents are also aware to have back up plans as alternatives if they were to be unemployed for a certain period of time. This is positive as they have listed some meaningful alternatives such as freelancing or even as sit in temporary teachers. With this mind set, however, it raises the question of the respondent's urgency to secure a job may be deferred as other alternatives are available.

The respondents have also shown awareness of attributes of employability and have prioritized soft skills, communication skills followed by personality as the most top attributes. And they do believe that they have these attributes though those from the Islamic faculty admit that they however lack the communication skills. Respondents made claims that the university has helped them to gain these attributes through workshops, college activities, co curricula, assignments, etc with no mention of the formal learning of lectures or tutorials.

As with their awareness towards low level proficiency in English as attributing factor to low rate employability, they are highly aware but mentioned that the low quality of UKM graduate is due to the deterioration in acquiring the soft skills. They further believe that the building of their confidence to speak English will definitely boost their competency to speak English. The FTSM students are highly agreeable that English is very important and are aware of its relevance to their potential jobs especially in reading and writing of documents. Interestingly, those respondents from the Islamic Faculty also see the need for them in terms of imparting knowledge of Islam. There are however, a number of respondents who thought that English is not that important and that soft skills and communication skills are much more significant. This contradicts the findings on the lack of certain attributes that were expressed by the industries in studies such as Morshidi et.al (2004) and Hamidah Yamat (2002). Not to mention the recent

mention of 'top jobs only for those who know the language well' as reported in the STAR (April 2011). One respondent has also added that one can even get a job without having to be good in English. This shows that there is also a belief as such amongst the graduates that raises a concern and needs to be noted.

Respondents are also aware that their level of proficiency as compared to other universities is lower. This comparison is however towards several private universities in Malaysia as they believe that their low level of proficiency is of a parallel level to other top public universities. They believe that there is no difference here.

In general, the respondents believe that their weakness with regard to the skills of English is primarily speaking. This indicates that the respondents probably believe that they are rather good with listening, reading and writing. This is as according to Hamidah Yamat (2002) that the students are weak in their productive skills. Whether the university has helped them to build their skills in English, only a small number from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Islam do not believe so. In their ranking of the most important skills in English, the respondents in general believe that speaking is most important followed by writing and listening with the least important is reading. This is a mind-set that needs to be addressed by language practitioners as all skills are by right inter dependently important. They are aware that other than English skills, there are also other important skills to acquire such as ICT, leadership and self impression.

These respondents have mainly listed several means to improve their English and this includes lecturers to speak in English, to employ foreign lecturers, to have lectures in English and to have more outside classroom activities like English Day, etc. The students are aware of means to improve and how and where they are lacking. Through their recommendations, one can observe their level of awareness towards this dilemma where exposure seems significant. They further commented that the English taught at the university has helped them to improve especially as with the Foundation English course, the respondents claimed that this has a 100% boosted their level of confidence. The Workplace Communication course is to the respondents a very meaningful and relevant English course. This however is not the case with a small number of respondents from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Islamic. In relation to soft skills, majority of the respondents believe that such skills are only obtained from the college activities. It is worth to observe an interesting triangulation between what the students believe, their attitude towards employability and the placing of English with what they have been trained at their tertiary level as a preparation to take up the challenges of the real working world. On the whole, it is true to support Morshidi Sirat's et al (2010) claim that besides students' lack of competence to speak well in English, they are not committed enough, not prepared to face challenges and not brave enough to take risks.

## **6. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper has revealed the prospective employee profile of student undergraduate at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). In the investigation to measure undergraduate awareness and readiness towards employability with a focus on English competency as an attribute to employability, a profile of attributes of the students prior to their exit into the working world had emerged. The researchers were able to categorically code the responses which based on their beliefs and attitude, awareness towards attributes of employability at the pre exit point of their tertiary journey into the 'real world'. The researchers' instincts commend that the responses from the undergraduates are very much at surface level. For instance in believing that they have the attribute of communication skills, it is worth to seek further of what they actually understand the meaning of soft skills attribute and whether this belief matches what the industries believe. In conclusion there is a certain level of awareness and readiness amongst the respondents though a further level of awareness is needed in terms of especially the respondents mind set as prospective employees which could be more pro activated.

This study has given a general scenario of the profiling of prospective employees amongst the undergraduate students in UKM. A similar scenario can be expected of other public universities in Malaysia where the academic context is significantly similar. This is especially so when English is not the language medium in lectures or outside lectures and a common scenario with the public universities than compared to the private universities. Mainly because, it is a common knowledge with the Malaysians that the private universities have English as their academic setting language.

This study has also highlighted the methodology used to gain these perceptions. The project as a whole has pursued other means of data collection for purpose of triangulation. These had included student questionnaire distributed online to the final year student population on campus. A focus group interviews with lecturers of English and subject content with a face to face interview with those employers from the industries who have experienced specifically recruited the UKM graduates. It would be worth for researchers in the Asian region to observe these findings and to compare them with their own contexts.

It has also portrayed the student mind set which is worth to investigate in a wider scope of student population in the Asian region where English is not their mother tongue. A similar situation which one cannot escape is the fact the English is the international working language and how does this fair with the existing profiling of our Asian students in meeting the demands of the industries; not only in the region but also to be able to perform at the international platform globally.

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