

# SKILLS GAP: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS IN GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY BETWEEN THE PERSPECTIVES OF EMPLOYERS AND GRADUATES

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Received 2021.10.03-Accepted 2021.11.10

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of soft skills among employers and graduates in Sarawak, using descriptive quantitative research methodology to determine if there is a significant difference between the employers and graduates; to compare differences in ranking of soft skills, and thus the occurrence of a skills gap between both parties. The literature reviews in this study emphasized, firstly, the perceptions of graduates and employers on soft skills about employability, a topic which had been studied over the decades across the world, since the skills gap or mismatch arose from the different perceptions is an ongoing phenomenon, that affected the curriculum of the higher education institutions and the labour market in the industries. Second, soft skills development has evolved; it has been referred to as 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills; a critical component of today's graduates' employability. Then, this study examined the perception of stakeholders involved in graduate employability, in particular, employer and graduate. The skills gap existed as a result of the disparities in perceptions between graduates and employers and the findings revealed there are differences in ranking orders, and frequency analysis confirmed the mean score comparisons of the ranking options between both parties. In terms of employers' demographic characteristics, significant differences were spotted after analysing a one-way ANOVA. These findings aimed to provide useful information to the stakeholders involved in assisting with the reduction of the skills gap and hence improve the graduate employability in Sarawak.

**Key words:** Employability, Soft skills, Skills gap, Stakeholders.

## INTRODUCTION

The skills gap in graduates' employability arose owing to the different perceptions towards the importance of soft skills among the stakeholders, particularly between employers and graduates (Matsuoka & Mihail, 2016). Over the decades, there is no lack of study regarding the skills gap, as employers consistently demonstrated that they needed the essential soft skills from graduates, regardless of the industry or work level, to balance supply and demand of the labour market, that is, to reduce the gap (Hurrell, 2015). The skills gap is a major impetus to graduates unemployment, statistics revealed that Malaysia is reporting unemployment of more than 170,000 graduates with 13,900 unemployed for over six months (Singh, Thambusamy, Ramly, Abdullah, & Mahmud, 2013), despite the efforts by the Ministry of Education and Education's National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017), the issue of lack of soft skills possessed by graduates demanded by employers persisted. Thus, this study aims to identify if employers and graduates perceive soft skills differently, as well as to investigate if the demographic characteristics contributed to the different perceptions in employers' views, more specifically, in the categories of employers' age, gender, and company size.

## Literature Review

### Graduate Employability

Over the decades, the definition of employability has been attempted by many and highly debated. Hillage and Pollard (1998) defined employability as "the knowledge, skills, and attitudes graduates have acquired through higher education can demonstrate" while Yorke and Knight (2003) summarized employability as "a set of achievements, including skills, understandings, and personal attributes, that offer a better chance for gaining employment". According to Tomlinson (2012), no individual can rely on existing educational and labour market profiles to mould his career progression, since the dynamic and skill-rich nature of the employment requires an individual to extensively and continuously learn and accumulate a portfolio of skills for career advancement, therefore, employability consists of a lifelong learning process. In short, employability is the ability to get a job, remain in that job, and excel in career development. Tymon (2013) suggested employability is multidimensional (Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet, & Rossier, 2015) with three perspectives, namely, employer, graduate, and higher education institution, whereby employability consists of internal and external portfolios; thus, the researchers of this study summarized this idea in the following "equation":  
Employability = Hard skills (External portfolio) + Soft skills (Internal portfolio).

Where hard skills are core knowledge and skills obtained through higher education, and soft skills are a wide variety of personal attributes (Clarke, 2017), Clarke (2017) summarized the complex terminology of employability as “the knowledge and skills and attributes” that graduates need to possess to gain and/or maintain employment.

“The Graduate Tracer Study” organized by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2010, stated that 24.6% or approximately 43,000 graduates (total numbers of 174,464) remained unemployed for six months (Fong, Sidhu, & Fook, 2014). Since then, the percentage of unemployed graduates steadily increased over the years, thanks to the repeated complaints from the employers with the reviews of the lack of necessary competencies in graduates. In lieu of this critical on-going phenomena, Malaysian Government rolled out the National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017) in hope to provide guidelines in correcting the labour market imbalanced, and since having urging higher education institutions to incorporate curriculum based on Employability Attributes Framework (EAF), aimed to beef-up the graduates’ competencies thereby enhancing their employability (Jayasingam & Fujiwara, 2016). However, Fong et al. (2014) highlighted the attempts to produce higher quality graduates are trailing behind the rapid changes and dynamic nature of the labour market and global employment circuit. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic magnified the volatility of labour markets, jobs became scarce as industries are crippled by the stagnant economic development around the world. Therefore, graduate employability is challenged, new attitudes and new skills are adamantly needed to be addressed, under the post-Covid-19 new normal scenarios (Muhammad Iqmal, Azuan, Mohd Asri, & Saffa Nasuha, 2020). Mohamed and Aisha (2020) concurred with Muhammad Iqmal et al. (2020) that while industries are repositioning their post-pandemic market strategies, downsizing of the workforce is an undeniable measure, led to lower in-take of fresh graduates, thus the employability of graduates will be shifted to higher standards, and graduates need to be more competitive to ensure the survivals in the labour market (Masura, Kamsuriah, Sufian, & Noor Faridatul, 2012).

### Soft Skills Development

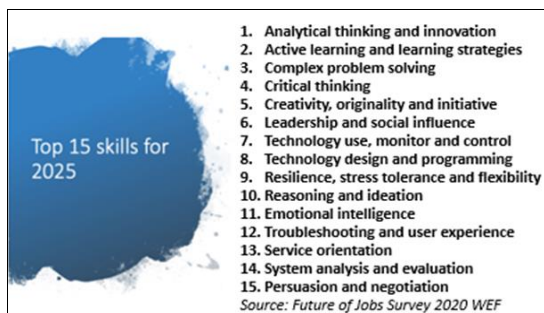
Succi (2019) broadly defined soft skills as “a mix of understandings, attributes, and practices” (Yorke, 2006) that is dynamically combined cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal and intellectual skills to positively help people adapt and behave when dealing with the challenges of their professional and daily life. Employability involved the growth of human capital, especially in this knowledge-based 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy. The key element that determined the success or failure of graduate employability is that broad set of skills and character traits that are transferable and yield lifelong learning – the soft skills, now commonly called “the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills” (Mc Gunagle & Zizka, 2020). Williams (2015) termed soft skills as non-technical skills that included interpersonal, human, people, or behavioural skills required to apply the technical skills during employment. Soft skills are competencies employers sought after alongside appropriate technical knowledge and skills. Graduates who possess the necessary competencies have an edge of employability

as today’s labour market is in oversupply and those who manifested soft skills above traditional technical skills gained competitive advantages, over those who are not (Jayasingam & Fujiwara, 2016). Therefore, Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, and Zehner (2013) suggested graduates needed to competitively develop soft skills, the skills prioritized by employers, to ensure a position in the workforce. Soft skills are seen as one inseparable element in employability skills, vis-a-vis the technical knowledge and skills (Williams, 2015), and soft skills are an important predictor of employability since these attributes determined employment outcomes (Finch et al., 2013). Soft skills evolved with time and changed with the labour market, just as employability is. Our social and economic fundamentals altered alongside rapid technological advances created a seamless global economy, so are soft skills development and labour market requirements, soft skills have become 21<sup>st</sup>-century survival skills in today’s knowledge-based economy (Soule & Warrick, 2015). Therefore, soft skills are meant for lifelong learning to continue one’s betterment in this 21<sup>st</sup> century (Succi & Canovi, 2019). Adequate and appropriate soft skills augured well for career success and social interactivities in the community – a study showed by Shaheen, Zhang, Shen, and Siti Raihana (2012). Yasmin, Md Nasir, Anuar, and Muhammad Najib (2012) agreed that necessary employability skills not only secured employment but also enabled one to reach his potential and contribute to the employer and the industry as a whole. The issue of personality qualities concerning the workplace evolved in the 1990s where knowledge-based inputs became important, this phenomenon escalated by the middle of the millennium decade (Kyllonen, 2013). Since soft skills are categorized as humanly related, personality is a behavioural trait that carries weight (Williams, 2015), Kyllonen (2013) reviewed that such non-cognitive skills are conceptualized as human-capital theory, and they are skills and abilities that become a major factor in enhancing productivity, either in personal life or workplace.

As Soulé and Warrick (2015) implied, soft skills development encompasses all life stages, a lifelong learning process in mastering soft skills empowers one to utilize their knowledge and skills beyond academic years. The benefit of enhancing soft skills development increased the chance for better employment and success in the workplace, study found soft skills deployment is 80% higher than merely cognitive-based or hard skills (Kyllonen, 2013). Hence, the ever-changing employability scenarios generate equally dynamic evolution in soft skills development. Soft skills are meant for social interactions, in daily life and the workplace environment. Deming (2017) explained that this is an era of the industrial revolution 4.0, Artificial Intelligence (AI) or programmed robotic machines took over a big chunk of workload and tasks. However, human cannot be replaced totally under this modern economic structure, as machines do not possess soft skills – a human skill set. This shift of paradigm demanded a shift in skills required from employees to becoming more flexible, adaptive, and team-based multitaskers. This kind of new world requires employees to interact not only within their organisation but also with different cultures around the globe, the usage of proper interpersonal skills is an immensely critical impetus for team works and team motivation

(Dean, 2017). Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommended the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to include and emphasize skills for developing sustainable lifestyles, gender equality, global citizenship, and cultural awareness - 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills or simply, the soft skills (Okolie, Igwe, Nwosu, Eneje, & Mlanga, 2019).

According to World Economic Forum (2016), the most crucial soft skills are classified into Competencies, Foundational Literacies and Character Qualities, this is an enormous mission shouldered upon higher education institutions to blend a complex set of skills into curriculum, particularly for developing countries, such as Malaysia (Mehrnaz, Pradeep, Sedigheh Shakib, Maryam, & Feng, 2019). A job survey implemented by the World Economic Forum, listed fifteen skills in demand for the year 2025, as Figure 1. below, there existed the occurrence and evidence of dynamic changes in the employment sector and the labour markets. Expectations of skills needed in 2025 underlying the implication of that in the post-Covid-19 pandemic era, the world labour market dynamic will shift into reskilling and upskilling of millions of relocated employees thus shifting the definitions and requirement of global employability, including graduates' employability (World Economic Forum, 2020).



**Fig.1: World Economic Forum on Future of jobs survey, listed January 2020**

In the Malaysian Economic Action Council 2003, employability of Malaysian Graduates report reasoned local graduates being unemployed due to the lack of global awareness and positive attitude towards their career development, henceforth, Ministry of Higher Education implemented a list of soft skills development into undergraduate programs intended to address the shortages of soft skills in Malaysian graduates (Yasmin et al., 2012). Faridah, Norlaila, Rozmel, and Maryam (2012) urged the Malaysian education system to be revamped into a market-driven (Jayasingam & Fujiwara, 2016) focus to produce 'work-ready' graduates geared with necessary 21<sup>st</sup>-century soft skills. As encouraged by the Ministry of Higher Education, the numbers of public universities and private higher education institutions bloomed and moved toward the massification of higher education (Latisha & Surina, 2010), thus the roles shifted from providing mere academic excellence to preparing a bigger number of the young generation for life in advanced industrial society. The Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah (Soft Skills) Untuk Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, as instructed by MOHE identified thirty-four soft skills

rolled-out, in expectant of graduates to obtain appropriate soft skills for employment as well as for success in this globalisation era (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2011). However, Mehrnaz et al. (2019) revealed that the soft skills recommended being blended into higher education curricula, presented a lack in alignment between pedagogy and students' work experiences, thereby creating a gap or a mismatch between employers' desired skills and graduate actual employability skills (Sivapalan, Choy, & Maros, 2012).

### Stakeholders of Higher Education

With the increasing emphasis on graduate employability, higher education institutions (HEIs) around the globe regarding this subject matter as their major goal, striving to minimize the skills gap between the institutions and the industry. Pereira, Vila-Boas, and Rebelo (2020) stated that the gap caused by the lack of soft skills in the graduates should be a joint effort among stakeholders – the graduates/students, the employers, and HEIs. Ferns (2012) posited that embedding employability into higher education curriculum is the vital role of HEIs, to explicitly satisfy the stakeholders, particularly, the government for sustainable skilled labour market; employers' demand for competitive applicants for recruitment, and graduates to be job-ready and highly employable. This suggested phenomenon is a global impetus in changes in HEIs, whereby graduates are expected to master employability skills upon completing higher education (Jackson, 2016). However, decades later, the integration of employability skills into the curriculum had yet to be positively reflected in graduate employability (Pereira et al., 2020). This study zoomed into two major stakeholders, namely, employers and graduates, for examination of perceptions purpose.

### Employers

Brits (2018) commented employers are generally not satisfied with the quality of employability graduates presented in the workplace, as employers urged higher education institutions to "continually improve their quality". In particular, employers are seeking effective communicators who are adaptively flexible with the attitude to continue learning, and willing to show initiative at work and in personal life. In short, employers want graduates who can display more soft skills than their qualifications (Tymon, 2013; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010; Finch et al., 2013). According to Clarke (2017), employers tend to perceive the 'ideal graduate,' who possesses qualities such as "talented, creative, dynamic, and full of potential," and place high expectations on their graduate recruitment exercises. These are qualities too intrinsic for any curriculum and pressurised the graduates to demonstrate those qualities are deemed unnecessary to be included in employers' actual required skills expected from graduates. According to Dean (2017), the workforce composition has changed because, in this technology-driven digital era, businesses face fierce competition in a dynamic globalised setting; thus, employees are expected to be skilled in interpersonal skills and team working abilities, and interactions with diverse workgroups are unavoidable.

Employers are on the demand side of the labour market, they are an important stakeholder in higher education who are liable to provide an intangible source of information in graduate employability, that provides

profiles in addressing HEIs' curriculum with regards to employability (Ferns, 2012). Tymon (2013) stated that there is a strong expectation from employers to HEIs in playing the role of producing 'job-ready graduates. However, the supposed training provided by employers to the graduates has been reduced over the decades, due to the obvious economic factor and the findings of lack of commitment and interpersonal skills found in generation Y employees. Pereira et al. (2020) mentioned that employers' emphasized soft skills development in enhancing graduate employability lays on the shoulder of the HEIs and the curricular. During recruitment, employers acknowledged that graduation was a mere beginning of much more learning and development needed in the employment journey, thus individual attributes and proactive-ness of graduates became the core of employability. Nevertheless, Jackson (2016) recommended striking a better understanding among stakeholders enables interactions to identify essential skills needed as well as strategies to enhance those skills, leading to positively narrowing the gaps.

Malaysia is facing the 'same music' in the sense of graduates are unable to meet employers' expectations in the workforce. Most employers would hire, retain and promote employees who are dependably resourceful and positively self-directed as well as good communicators who are willing to learn - the standard blend of soft skills desirable by employers (Shaheen et al., 2012). Afifah and Razli (2019) stated that research indicated graduates in Malaysia are unable to possess the right combination of good qualifications and a high level of soft skills to meet the employers' requirements. In general, Malaysian employers ranked highly on critical thinking and interpersonal skills while leadership skills and technology skills ranked less important. Envisioning the crucial skills needed in the workplace, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced the development of soft skills to be implemented in higher education institutions, mainly focused on communication skills, team working, critical thinking, lifelong learning, entrepreneurship, ethics and moral management and leadership (Fong et al., 2014). Yasmin et al. (2012) abstracted results from a survey done with over 100 companies, listed the top ten soft skills sought by Malaysian employers, they are, integrity, willingness to learn, communication skills, initiative, achievement orientation, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, flexibility, high self-esteem, and critical thinking. Employers have identified various downsides in graduates' skills and attributes. Asma, Rabab, Remya, and Danah (2018) emphasized graduate employability plays vital parts in graduates' career development, the growth of the organizations, and the economy; a list from their survey, the soft skills employers are seeking from graduates is summarized in Figure 2.

**Graduates/Students**

Today's higher education students and graduates demand options, personalisation, efficiency, and good employment outcomes. A study by Kinash and Crane (2015) indicated that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century graduates anticipated extra-curriculum in boosting their employability which included work experience, internships, and/or on-the-job training. Tymon (2013) indicated that graduates believed that their academic qualifications yielded less differentiation value but 90% viewed employability skills development through work

experiences enabled the graduates with wider employability. Graduates anticipated there are given skill requirements for them to assess, before applying for the job position, hence, students must have the awareness of the skills required by the workforces, allowing them to acquire and develop. With awareness, students and graduates are called upon to develop 'career management skills, a road map of career goals, which will enhance graduates' self-confidence and raise the bar for self-perceived employability (Tomlinson, 2017). Generally, graduates, after convocations, soaring with high hopes that whatever they acquired from the HEIs are those demanded by the industry (Shivoro, Shalyefu, & Kadhila, 2017), even though graduates acknowledged and recognized the importance of soft skills in employability; the facts showed insufficiency in soft skills development for employment by the employers (Pereira et al., 2020). Tomlinson (2012) revealed that the number of graduates being employed below their level of education and skills has been on an upward trend, as a result of the over-supply in the labour market. It is also underlining higher education institutions are not producing graduates that fitted what the labour market's actual demand. Tymon (2013) concurred that this situation is the result of the higher education institutions being uncertain of current employment requirements. Thus, the awareness of acquiring additional employability skills for career development has been on a high notch amongst student populations.

Skills	
Basic Skills	Computer skills Work Ethics MS Office
Inter-personal Skills	Communication (Verbal, Non-verbal, Listening) Team working Time management Negotiation Problem solving Conflict resolution Leadership Adaptability Decision making
Intra-personal Skills	Self-awareness Self-regulation Self-organized Motivation Honesty Empathy Discipline Social skills
Specific Knowledge	Professional Practical Operational On-campus internship

**Fig. 2 - The most important skills employers are seeking (Asma et al., 2018)**

In Malaysia, Nooriah and Zakiyah (2015) saw 90% of graduates seeking advancement in developing their employability to meet the market needs of employment, as their higher education did not deliver sufficient soft skills development. Graduates are "newbies" in the labour market, having their perceptions of the possibilities of securing new employment and/or maintaining their current jobs as well as obtaining future new employment, this phenomenon is termed as the "perceived employability" (Guilbert et al., 2015). Perceived employability is subjective and varied in a different understanding of the labour market, which is strongly tied to personal factors and the environment that graduates are surrounded with; it is depending on the self-efficacy on the subject matters and skills possessed by an individual (Vanhercke, De Cuyper, Peeters, & De Witte, 2014). Clarke (2017) defined

perceived employability as the way one sees own abilities and skills and the disposition towards employment and career. Graduates' perception of employability can be enhanced through improving their attributes via soft skills development, hence chances of securing employment are thus increased.

Most graduates wanted to be employable. According to Gallup-Purdue Index 2016 report, the number of higher education enrolments has increased 86% since 2010, as the graduate-to-be realized enrolling into higher education presented the critical factor for getting employment (Wolff & Booth, 2017). However, Williams (2015) pointed out graduates tend to assume skills they acquired during academic years defined the readiness for employment without the factual understanding of the all-rounded competencies employers need, especially in the area of soft skills requirements. Graduates are aware that competence soft skills value-added their competitiveness in procuring employment, they entrusted the higher education institutions and their syllabus in providing the necessary soft skills to beef up their employability (Shivoro et al., 2017). However, despite graduates understanding the crucial importance of soft skills in their employability, Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010) discovered that most graduates are not in full confidence in what they have are in demand by employers, therefore resulting in many graduates continue pursuing advancement in skills, whether they are being employed or otherwise. A survey done by Artess, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne (2017) summarised the skills graduates perceived as important for employability is shown in figure 3 below:



**Fig. 3: Skills graduates perceived as important (Artess et al., 2017)**

Transformation Nasional 50 (TN50), aiming to cruise Malaysia to becoming the Top 20 nation in the world by 2050, injection of high-quality foreign investment is one of the strategies to attain this vision, as this would create more high-pay, high-skilled employment for the domestic labour market. Erni, Husna, Astri, Heng, and Khairul (2019) sadly found the lack of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills possessed by Malaysian local graduates. Cheong, Leong, and Hii (2019) revealed that Malaysian education quality reflected 'poor' by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the quality of fresh graduates, indicated by JobStreet.com survey is marked with more 'poor's than 'good's; owing to the lack of employability skills in soft skills development. Besides the strong decisive role played by parents and family in selections of courses as well as HEIs, students

are reportedly irresponsible with their employability acquisition..

**Skills Gap**

This study confirmed that the different perceptions between graduates and employers served as the primary cause for the skills gap, owing to the lack of understanding of the industries' soft skills requirements. Tsirkas, Chytiri, & Bouranta (2020) concluded that many factors are inducing the skills gap, one obvious reason is the over-estimation of graduates on their soft skills abilities, and employers' over-determined expectations. The Gallup survey results reported by Wolff and Booth (2017) mentioned that the higher education syllabus believed the "workplace skills" were taught but employers opposed as graduates were unable to apply those skills into actual employment settings. The survey also indicated that the alignment in the employability skills between higher education programs and employers (Shivoro et al., 2017) is ineffective, moreover, graduates are not given the chance to experience a "hands-on" or "work-based learning" environment for the application of their workplace skills. Thus the mismatches of skills have been an ongoing phenomenon that has yet to be mitigated for decades. In Malaysia, it is reported in 2015 that 25% of graduates unemployed within six months upon graduation, and the numbers are growing since (Jayasingam & Fujiwara, 2016), as a whopping 77.6% of employers opined graduates lack needed soft skills for employment (Faridah et al., 2012). Therefore, it is obvious that the skills gap caused by the different perceptions, in turn, affected graduates' employability.

Tymon (2013) posited graduates' opinions in their employability skills development is crucial as they are the recipients into the workforce, however, research showed they lacked appreciation in this development generated the so-called perceived employability which the labour market's soft skills needs are not being taken at heart, hence the existence of the skills gap. Skills gap can be minimised by graduates taking up bigger responsibility for their employability by continuously reflecting on their competencies to suit the workforce demands, whilst employers must ensure to make known what soft skills are needed, and support graduates' on-the-job learning (Sin & Neave, 2016). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are called upon to assist in closing the skills gap that is on an upward-trend, by acknowledging employers' views of soft skills needed and adapting into their academic programmes ensuring graduates they produced to enter the workforce armed with necessary soft skills that employers demanded (Finch et al., 2013; Mc Gunagle & Zizka, 2020). On the flip side, Clarke (2017) commented that while demanding soft skills competencies from graduates, realistic assessment of skills wanted during recruitment by employers is critical, as employers tend to promote "ideal" graduates (Tsirkas et al., 2020) with "talent, creative, dynamic and full of potential" that are impossible to define yet unreal for graduates or even HEIs to fulfill.

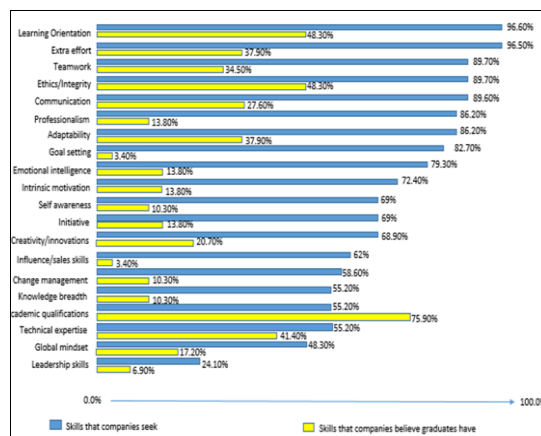
Burrus, Jackson, Xi, and Steinberg (2013) noted that the abovementioned skills gap existed as no matter how quickly or effectively higher education syllabus evolved in meeting the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce, the syllabus

would not be able to catch up with the fast-paced and dynamic nature of today’s global businesses and labour markets. Typically, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the labour market is predicted to reduce workforce as industries are re-strategizing and re-positioning the upcoming standing in the markets (Mohamed & Aisha, 2020), a shift in perceiving the importance of soft skills is inevitable (Singh et al., 2013), the survey done in this study during the movement control orders period intended to provide a vital piece of information to the stakeholders of higher education for their references and possibly act upon improving graduates’ employability. Matsuoka and Mihail (2016) pointed out there exist a “gap” or “mismatch” or “skills gap” (Wolff & Booth, 2017), in the survey of perceptions in soft skills (Figure 4); implicating the link between employers and graduates need further investigations to crucially addressing this “gap”. As the matter of fact, there are no shortages of studies that found this mismatch or gap, Wolff and Booth (2017) stated that employers consistently revealed that, regardless of the industries or level of work, the employability qualities they needed are the essential soft skills from the graduates (Mc Gunagle & Zizka, 2020). Mc Gunagle and Zizka commented that graduates must possess the skills and demonstrate the self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem that employers required (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), to balance the supply and demand in the labour market, i.e. minimizing the gap (Hurrell, 2015). Business news in 2015 reported that World Bank anticipated employment in Malaysia to rise from 10.4 million in 2010 to 12.7 million in the year 2020. However, the impact of the skills gap is enormous and influenced companies’ capacities in achieving productivity targets, as 62% of companies in Malaysia are challenged by hiring appropriate employees with the required skills; and according to CareerBuilder’s 2017 survey, 67% of employers are critically concerned about the increasing skills gap occurred in the workforces (Kamal, 2018).

**Methodology**

This is descriptive quantitative research, by collecting cross-sectional data to enable the description of the perceptions of graduates and employers in Sarawak, online questionnaires are used for surveying the two groups of respondents, as the survey is the common practice in cross-sectional data collection. Perceptions are humanly related, online surveys are deemed effective and efficient (Levin, 2006). The questionnaire format used in this study are into two parts, section one is a brief survey on respondent’s profile – gender, age, and company size (number of employees), whilst section two contained twenty-five soft skills – with a brief description of each skill, for the respondent to rank their importance according to respondent’s perception. The skills are generated adopting mainly from Succi and

Canovi (2019) and are being grouped into three major categories, firstly, the personal growth, which consists of goal setting, self-awareness, and creativity; the second category is named socialising skills that included communication, critical thinking, and leadership. Lastly, the methodological category is comprised of analytical skills, collaborative skills, as well as lifelong learning. By using a six-point Likert Scale to survey the respondents’ preferences, where 1 being “least important” and 6 for “extremely important”, this study omitted the neutral option for the sake of data reliability.



**Fig. 4: Skills employers seek and skills employers believe graduates have (Matsuoka & Mihail, 2016)**

The samples of this study are categorized into two groups, firstly, is the 395 graduates from a local higher education institution who had graduated in December of 2017, are sourced from the databases of employment centres and departments of industrial training. The underlying basis for this particular batch of graduates selected is that they have been in the market for at least three years, can provide more valid and meaningful information with regards to their experiences in employment. The second group is the 30 employers from a non-governmental group of businesses – the Eminence Chapter of the Business International Networks (BNI), a purposive sampling strategy is used for this targeted sample. The members of BNI operated an array of businesses, with different company sizes and under different industries, they are commonly advocating soft skills development for their employees since a majority of the members are contributors of HRDF training levies under the Ministry of Human Resources Development training scheme. A pilot study yielded Cronbach’s alphas of .953 and .980 for employers and graduates, respectively; the values are at an acceptable level of quality as posited by Taber’s summaries (2017), in terms of reliability.

The data analyses are summarised in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: List of research objectives and hypotheses**

Objectives	Hypotheses	Analysis
1 To identify which soft skills are ranked important by the respondents.		Mean scores
2 To identify if employers and graduates perceive soft skills differently.	Ho <sub>2</sub> : Employers and graduates do not perceive soft skills differently.	Mean scores
3 To determine whether there is are significant differences between the importance of soft skills and employers’ demographic characteristics.	Ho <sub>3</sub> : There are no significant differences in perception among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on employers’ demographic characteristics.	One-way analysis of variance ANOVA

Objectives	Hypotheses	Analysis
a) To investigate if there are significant differences in perceptions among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on gender	H <sub>03(a)</sub> : There are no significant differences in perception among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on employers' gender.	t-test (two-tailed)
b) To investigate if there are significant differences in perceptions among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on age	H <sub>03(b)</sub> : There are no significant differences in perception among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on employers' age.	t-test (two-tailed)
c) To investigate if there are significant differences in perceptions among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on company size	H <sub>03(c)</sub> : There are no significant differences in perception among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on employers' company size.	t-test (two-tailed)

To answer the first and second research questions and hypotheses, mean scores comparisons are being utilised to rank the orders of the important soft skills by both employers and graduates, at the same time hypothetically tested if there are significant differences in the perceptions between the two. As for objective 3, the study is to answer the research question of the different perceptions among employers based on demographic characteristics – gender, age, and company size, thus testing the hypotheses are required as indicated in Table 1, this study is using a two-tailed t-test, as for comparison of more than two groups, the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) is being implemented.

### Findings and Discussions

The findings from data analyses consisted of the ranking orders of the perceptions of importance of soft skills by graduates and employers, and the differences in perceptions between the two respondents, as well as the perceptions of employers in accordance of their

demographic characteristics; are being discussed in this section.

### Ranking and different perceptions between employers and graduates

Mean score comparisons are used in finding the soft skills ranking between graduates and employers, evidently, in the graduates' opinions, balancing life poised the utmost important skill to possess (M=5.53), followed by communication skills, at a mean score of 5.48; while self-care is ranked third important (M=5.46). On the other hand, employers posited that the proactivity skill is an extremely vital skill for their recruitment criteria (M=5.70), followed by job commitment attribute (M=5.67) then the third importance, mean score of 5.63 is the organisational skills. The results concurred with various studies done by researchers from different countries and provided answers in the ranking orders for soft skills between graduates and employers, stated in the first research objective (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison between graduates and employers

No.	Description	Graduates			Employers		
		Rank order	Mean	S.D.	Rank order	Mean	S.D.
1	Goal setting	16	5.15	.779	9	5.20	.664
2	Job commitment	12	5.30	.798	2	5.67	.547
3	Organisational skills	7	5.36	.729	3	5.63	.556
4	Self-care	3	5.46	.737	7	5.37	.669
5	Balancing life	1	5.53	.677	8	5.23	.817
6	Self-awareness	17	5.11	.858	9	5.20	.847
7	Ethical	6	5.39	.737	6	5.40	.855
8	Creativity	4	5.41	.726	6	5.40	.814
9	Self-presentation	5	5.40	.707	4	5.47	.571
10	Communication	2	5.48	.669	4	5.47	.776
11	Critical thinking	10	5.32	.738	9	5.20	.805
12	Social enterprising	13	5.28	.760	10	5.17	.874
13	Networking	11	5.31	.764	7	5.37	.615
14	Leadership	12	5.30	.765	5	5.43	.817
15	Team spirit	8	5.35	.748	6	5.40	.675
16	Empathy	5	5.40	.700	4	5.47	.681
17	Global awareness	14	5.25	.820	11	5.00	.983
18	Adaptability	13	5.28	.767	5	5.43	.568
19	Analytical skill	14	5.25	.732	8	5.23	.679
20	Lifelong learning	7	5.36	.740	7	5.37	.807
21	Decision making	9	5.34	.735	6	5.40	.621
22	Management skills	18	5.09	.911	12	4.90	1.094

No.	Description	Graduates			Employers		
		Rank order	Mean	S.D.	Rank order	Mean	S.D.
23	Productivity	10	5.32	.710	7	5.37	.556
24	Collaborative	15	5.19	.846	7	5.37	.765
25	Proactivity	10	5.32	.781	1	5.70	.535

From the graduates’ perspectives, communication skills ranked second, concurred with Succi and Canovi’s (2019)’s finding that communication skills ranked top three in the graduates’ category. Balancing of life is a skill termed under self-management skills claiming its popularity in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills with 62% of studies concentrated on this topic, opined by graduates in this study as number one important skill. Thirdly, is the self-care ability, a skill to tackle work stress issues by managing stress, weighted heavily by graduates which jived with the study by Succi and Canovi (2019). On the other hand, Succi and Canovi (2019) commented that employers wanted graduates who are work-ready and equipped with soft skills; as this type of graduates can commit to their jobs, get organised, and to proactively dependable, moreover, they are motivated in their career development. Employers are seeking effective communicators who are adaptively flexible with the attitude to continue learning, and willing to show initiative at work and in personal life. In short, employers want graduates who can display more soft skills than their qualifications (Tymon, 2013). It is undeniable that employers opted highly on proactivity ability as recruitment criteria, as this leads to job commitment and organisational skills, hence perceptions of these three skills are categorised as extremely important by employers (Succi & Canovi, 2019). As indicated by the findings, it is inarguable that graduates and employers do not share the same values in perceptions of soft skills, thus, answered the second research objective of this study.

As shown in Table 3, in the category of most extremely important skills, none of the skills coincided in the perceptions of both graduates and employers, a clear demonstration of disparities in both parties on the importance of soft skills. Graduates, commonly believed in their educational institutions and syllabus in providing them with the proper soft skills, besides their core academic qualifications, for them to be employable (Tomlinson, 2012). A survey by Teng, Ma, Pahlevansharif, and Turner (2019), indicated that graduates in Malaysia, ranked self-care ability, communication skills, and balancing life in the top five, as those are the skills graduates procured during their academic years, hence the belief level of the importance of the said skills are predetermined. Saunders & Zuzel (2010) listed communication skills and balancing life ability being the top ten important skills selected by the graduates, further commented graduates’ perceptions are formed through their higher education, either in the extra-curricular or the learning environment. Graduates viewed balancing of life as the top one skill, and this study defined these skills as self-efficacy and self-regulated, essentially one vital part of self-management skills. Communication skills are always ranked highly by graduates, as these are the skills widely included in the higher education syllabus, and self-care ability is a new 21<sup>st</sup>-century skill in promoting finding personal calmness under stress for better performance in life in general. These three soft skills chosen by the graduates

held a strong essence of individualism which represented graduates’ have direct benefits for themselves with these skills, but not in the understanding of the needs required by the industries, this scenario was discussed and termed as the graduate’s perceived employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

**Table 3: Most “extremely important” skills**

Descriptions	Graduates	Employers
Most extremely important skills	Balancing life	Proactivity
	Self-care ability	Job commitment
	Communication skills	Organisation skills

The above-mentioned findings concurred with Succi and Canovi (2019)’s results, employers placed job commitment as the top priority in the recruitment criteria since it implied the involvement level of graduates to commit to their employment that is vital for job dedication. Proactivity ability is highly required by employers (Daellenbach, 2018) as proactive graduates possessed strong traits in taking the initiative to career building and are effectively engaged in the labour market, thus are more adaptive to any changes in the labour market (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). According to a study by Archer and Davison (2008), 74% of employers opted highly on organisational skills, which included planning, as methodologically organised employees produced high effectiveness and efficient outcomes, benefiting the organisation’s bottom-lines (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

**Demographic characteristics of employers in perceiving importance of soft skills**

As a purposive sampling strategy is used for this study, there are thirty respondents selected to represent the employers in Sarawak. The respondents are members of a non-governmental group (NGO) –The Eminence Chapter of Business Networks International (BNI), who are either business owners or human resources managers of the corporations. The majority of the members of BNI are also members of the Human Resources Development Federation, under the Ministry of Human Resources of Malaysia, indicating their commitment to the training development of their employees. Moreover, BNI membership is structured by diversified industries, the thirty respondents are from the thirty-six industries listed in the Eminence Chapter, ranging from Food and Beverage, Financial Services, Information Technology development, Building, and Construction to various commodities supplies. While an important criterion of the respondents is that they are members of BNI for at least three years, with recruitment experiences, thus more informative and precise data can be collected through the survey exercise.



The third research objective of the study is to determine whether there are significant differences between the importance of soft skills and employers' demographic characteristics, in the following manner:

- (a) To investigate if there are significant differences in perceptions among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on gender.
- (b) To investigate if there are significant differences in perceptions among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on age.
- (c) To investigate if there are significant differences in perceptions among employers regarding the importance of soft skills based on company employee size.

**Table 4: Employers' profile**

Particular	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	19	63.3
Female	11	36.7
Age		
Below 37	13	43.3
37-47	11	36.7
48-52	4	13.3
Above 52	2	6.7
Company size		
Less than 5	12	40.0
5-11	10	33.3
12-49	7	23.3
Above 49	1	3.3

A summary of the employers' profile of this study is stated in Table 4. The gender composition of the respondents was 63.3% male and 36.7% female while the age distribution is categorized into four groups as shown in Table 4.2. Reportedly, 43.3% of the respondents are below 37 years old, combined with 36.7% of the 37-47 years old bracket, generated 80% of the total respondents. Therefore, the major respondents are aged below 47. As for the company size, it is specifically referred to numbers of the employee or staff strength, with 40% has less than 5 staff in the business operations, one-third of the total respondents has 5-11 employees, 23.3% employed 12-49 staffs, and only 3.3% owns more than 49 employees.

Perceptions of employers on the importance of soft skills based on gender

An independent samples test, the two-tailed t-test was conducted to compare soft skills perceptions between male and female compositions. The result indicated female employers ( $M=5.73, SD=.467$ ) expressed highly on the skills of team spirit as compared to male employers ( $M=5.21, SD=.713$ ). Team spirit is kindled through relationship building amongst team members (Succi & Canovi, 2019), it is a term for various important workplace skills needed to enable cooperative effort within a team in an organisation. Team spirit, the so-called esprit de corps, emphasised the mindset instead of skills, and it varied among different industries and levels of employment, however, team spirit is the essence of willingness to work with others, in whatever ways possible (Manzoor, Ulla, Hussain, & Ahmad, 2011).

Team spirit is one of the top ten skills listed by Malaysian employers as a vital interpersonal skill (Asma

et al., 2018) which is included in the Module for the Development of Soft Skills for Higher Learning Institution Malaysia by the Ministry of Higher Education. In this study, female employers valued working together in one team and one spirit, especially in the business world since strong team spirit promoted harmonious relationships among teammates and positive energy bring-forth desired outcomes for the organisational bottom-lines. While male employers enforced productivity and leaned towards result orientation, regardless of the results are performed individually or in a team environment. Girdauskiene and Eyvazzade (2015) stated women are "interactive leaders" who particularly insisted on enhancing employees' self-worth and are more driven than men in ascribing their power to interpersonal skills that emphasised employees' "feel good" or inner satisfaction at work, to reach organisational goals in teams. Commonly, females are built as nurturers by mother nature, it is interesting to realize that team spirit is recommended highly by female employers, as this study uses the term team spirit instead of teamwork skills, emphasizing the mindset instead of skills, a rather cognitive-based that involved consciousness; hence the definition probed the echo of feminism. This feminism is commented by Chandler (2011) that female employers believed in establishing a collegial work environment through cultivating a sense of empathy, respect, and team spirit to achieve a common goal.

**Perceptions of employers on the importance of soft skills based on age**

This study analysed with Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test, the result indicated that the mean score for the age group of 47-52 ( $M=5.00, SD=.817$ ) was significantly different than the age group of below 37 ( $M=5.85, SD=.376$ ). It is worth noting that, in this study, only four respondents (out of 30) are categorised in the age group of 47-52 years old, a mere 13.3% of the sampling population. On the other hand, 43.3% of the employers are below 37 years old, implying the respondents for employers are of more of younger generations. The significant difference found between these two age groups is in the skill of proactivity, which is popularly classified under "life skills" in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, became highly recommended skills for this digital era, alongside the renowned 4-Cs (Creativity, Communication, Critical thinking, and Collaboration). For graduates to become global citizens, the ultimate soft skill to take charge of their career development lies in the proactive attitude to pursue lifelong learning since by being proactive, employers can rely on the employee to deliver results and go above and beyond what is expected of that employee, around the world labour markets. Thus, unsurprisingly, proactivity is the top one skill ranked by the employers in this study, it involves self-initiation for the betterment of the future, it is also a personality which leads to the tendencies to 'own-up' the responsibilities of the outcomes of actions taken, that is the accountability, to the fulfillment of organizational goals (Parker & Wang, 2015). Parker and Wang (2015) concluded that proactivity is an "increasingly" important behaviour at the workplace. Hence, undoubtedly explained the significant differences that occurred as there is an age gap between the category below 37 and those aged 47-52 group.

Noticeably, the two age groups have an age gap of at least ten years, while the below 37's prompted to have better willingness in accepting latest phenomena this digital era has to offer, the 47-52 age group faces difficulties in adjusting towards the dynamic and constant evolving 21<sup>st</sup> century. Proactivity is a skill to be possessed from within, it involves taking initiative and taking charge of a person's role, either at the workplace or in daily life; for those under the 47-52 age group, proactivity does not ring a bell to their core belief levels, as theirs are stereo-typed by the concept of obedience and follow orders. As for the below 37, technology advancements and social media platforms offered an environment for self-learning, the tendency for building up proactivity skills, therefore, not surprisingly, the expectation for everyone to take charge and learn the right ways of doing things, has been cultivated into their attitude and emerged as a habit. Truxillo, McCune, Bertolino, and Fraccaroli (2012) posited that proactivity personality is highly related to motivation to learn, and making effort to take initiative to self-improvement (Huang, Zhang, Zhang, & Long, 2020), therefore, the older age group has lower energy level hence the degree of self-motivation to learn and advance in a career, is reduced as compared to the younger generation. Furthermore, according to the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, Huang, et al (2020) discovered that the older generation tends to be contented with the status quo and placed a higher value on their social networking rather than the younger ones in striving for future-oriented goals and betterment in lifestyles. Proactivity involves making changes, Van Veldhoven, and Dorenbosch (2008) realised that the personal initiative to change declined with age just as the self-motivation to learn. Therefore, different age groups played a critical role in determining the importance of soft skills in employability, in this case, the proactivity skills are found to have a significant difference in employers' age.

Perceptions of employers on the importance of soft skills based on company size

The company sizes of the respondents are being grouped into four categories, namely, below 5 employees, 5-11 employees, 12-49 staffs, and above 49 employees. Post hoc tests are not performed as the percentage frequency of one of the category (category above 49) showed 3.33% (.033) which is less than 5% (.05) as predetermined. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare soft skills perceptions according to the company size at  $p < .05$  resulted in significant differences in three soft skills, they are, Self-care ability with the score  $[F(3, 26)=4.18, p=.015]$ , team spirit scored  $[F(3, 26)=2.99, p=.049]$ , and management skills'  $[F(3, 26)=3.08, p=.045]$ .

Self-care ability, as mentioned above, is one of the self-management skills, it consisted of personal management which involved managing personality, career development, attaining personal goals as well as effective use of personal time-space. Self-management promotes the willingness for self-realisation, self-development and self-affirmation through an individual's initiative (Alieksieieva, Yershova, Kravets, Lapshyna, & Odnoroh, 2021). Findings from Palvalin, van der Voordt, & Jylhä, (2017) shown that workplaces that practice self-management has positive impact on both the employees and team's productivity, since

personality and working styles proved substantially influenced the relationship between workplace atmosphere and organisational productivity. Recent years, self-management has become a vital skill of the young generation, such as the graduates, as it provides the young with psycho-pedagogical tools in developing the infamous entrepreneurial competency, a crucial attribute particularly demanded by small and medium businesses (Yershova, 2019; Agbim, 2013). The respondents in this study for the employers' category, are entirely small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with company staff strength less than seventy-five employees, hence the findings of self-care ability to be significantly validated the reasoning stated.

Team spirit, or esprit de corps, has been discussed earlier in section 4.2.1 above. It is commonly understood that employers had been forever stressing the importance of recruiting employees who are into team environment. Moreover, organisations had never ceased in systemising team work activities and trainings in order to coordinate employees into different teams to pursue collective organisational goals. Manzoor et al (2011) emphasised most organisational activities are teams oriented aiming to enhance employees' performances thus team productivity, companies with teams tend to attract new recruits and to retain loyal employees as the connected esprit de corps amongst team members positively promoted peer empowerment and increased employees job satisfactory level. Therefore, obvious scenario is that, to break employees into different set-up is made difficult if the company size is smaller as compared to companies with a bigger numbers of staff. Majority of companies responded to this study has employee size of 5-49 staffs (56.7%), the width of the range difference is considered large, but on average, it is sufficient to form different teams with a few members each, as fewer members enjoyed the benefits of having more time for relationship building (Ebrahimi, 2009), promotion of team spirit thus gained its effectiveness.

Mamabolo, Kerrin, and Kele (2017) classified management skills into planning, problem solving, legal skills, decision-making, developing and executing a business model, strategic competence, delegation and business development, as the respondents in this study are operating businesses. This study defined management skills as the effective skills to lead, supervise and manage tasks or people, it included financial management, time management, and risk management (Afifah & Razli, 2019), it is about having the ability to select and distribute tasks and resources, within stipulated timelines (Succi & Canovi, 2019). The size of company determined the importance of management skills differently, as for smaller companies, the accessibility to train employees in acquiring management skills is easier comparing to larger number of employees', hence larger size company anticipated graduates to possess management skills more (Chan, Ahmad, Zaman, & Ko, 2018).

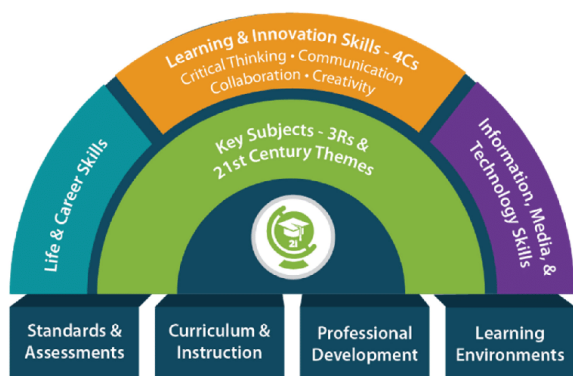
### Implications and conclusion

There are two-part implications illustrated in this segment, the first being the theoretical implication

where the Partnership of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning (P21) framework was being adapted; and some possible practical implications on the competency-based theory being suggested.

### Theoretical implication

By the year 2025, the world labour market is predicted to face “double disruption” of losses in employment caused by the extensive replacement of automation and the inevitable negative economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reportedly, 97 million new roles of employment will be created, thus the reskilling and upskilling of those displaced employers should becoming the main goals in the restructured employability (World Economic Forum, 2020). Soeiro and Balasubramanian (2016) stated that 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills are “the must-have” competencies in students’ career development, as they increased the competitiveness of the graduates in the global market, moreover, Tan (2016) commented that as the world has become much more dynamic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the P21 framework (Figure 5) promoted ‘higher-order thinking skills with active real-life applications, as opposed to the linear and rigid fashion in the 20th century. The P21 framework consists of core subjects with 21<sup>st</sup>-century themes (civic literacy, global awareness, financial literacy, health literacy, and environmental literacy), learning and innovation skills, information media and technology skills, as well as life and career skills. While the four blocks represented the supporting system applying competency-based fundamentals. Thus, this study posits that to develop soft skills applications to enhance graduate employability is the competencies-based approach.



**Fig. 5: The Partnership of 21<sup>st</sup> century Learning (P21) Framework (Raymundo, 2020).**

### Practical implication

Evidently, the focus of HEIs, overall, is more on content and theory, not their graduates’ careers beyond higher education, the packed curricula and loads of assignments drained the time and energy of their students for the pursuit of extra skills; leaving graduates to fend for their own in securing their careers and employability development. Curricula and pedagogy can be adjusted with the understanding of the factors that influence graduate attributes, only if HEIs can focus on research and development of practical solutions in their integration process. Sound approaches to embed and

integrate skills into discipline-specific content, such as stand-alone program and work-integrated learning (WIL), dedicated to employability skills development that aligned properly with the industry, can plausibly enhance graduate skills outcomes (Jackson, 2014). However, it is found that at the curriculum level, most academics are uneasy and uncomfortable in teaching skills outside their contented discipline-specific teaching experience (Collet, Hine, & du Plessis, 2015).

A survey with the three main stakeholders of employability by Pereira et al (2020), some practical suggestions for HEIs to improve employability can be summarised as: Firstly, HEIs to provide ongoing collaboration with the industries, similar to TVET programs, more in-depth understanding of the industries enables graduates to gather resourceful information for their employability; this is welcomed by graduates but employers are rather reluctant, due to the ever dynamic labour market, employers are short of time for such researches and compilation of data providences. Secondly, HEIs are urged to facilitate the relationship between graduates and companies in providing post-graduation support to graduate employability, through job matchings, preparing for job interviews, or offering orientations of the vacancies available. Thirdly, a more “right at home” approach for HEIs is to include sector-specific work placements to be integrated into the academic curriculum; where HEIs must gain appropriate details of the jobs the industry sector is offering to enable better and proper inclusions into the syllabus. Besides that, with more open and make-known understandings of actual demands from the workforce, allowing HEIs to include practical tasks and assignments in the specified courses that are relevant to the labour market, augurs well to improve graduates’ employability development as well as their career advancement in the future.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has taken measures to quality control of the teaching and learning in HEIs, however, employability skills are not included in the assessment though HEIs are urged to integrate skills into their curriculum (Erni et al., 2019). Cheong et al (2019) commented that it is a common refrain to focus on soft skills rather than the ethos of the Malaysian education system is on ‘passing examinations’, therefore the blame is shared between HEIs and the system, they argued that with this academic-oriented focus, lecturers, the by-product of the system, emphasized only textbook-based theory, prioritized teaching over meaningful learning; resulting in the lack of acknowledgment of the importance of embedding graduate employability. Despite Government launched Malaysia Graduates Employability Blueprint 2012–2017, Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (Ministry of Education 2012), and the Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016–2020 (Malaysia 2016), the outcomes are reportedly bleak; JobStreet.com survey showed 70% of employers gave “poor” remarks, hence, Government should institutionalize stakeholder interaction and provide incentives to the industry that took part in employability programs such as promoting Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). A proper framework for employability skill development is suggested to be established by a committee group, which consists of the employer, academician, and Government personnel, with a common goal to describe important employability

skills needed among the stakeholders to minimize the skills gap and to allow clearer scenario of the labour market for undergraduates and graduates (Erni et al., 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Due to the differences in perceptions of the importance of soft skills in employability between graduates and employers, there exist gaps. This study aims to prove the mismatches to confirm there is a gap, allowing suggestions and recommendations to be steered to the stakeholders involved, enabling better adjustments to improve employability. Today's employment environment is dynamic, the need to match the graduate skills with requirements of the industries calls for the employers to identify the skills and attributes they needed, as well as the higher education institutions to integrate classroom teaching with the real-life working environment (Weligamage, 2009). However, Mohamed and Aishah (2020) pointed out by closing the gap, integration of skills learning into day-to-day teaching creates challenges and time consuming, especially during this pandemic situation. Nevertheless, it is vital for higher education institutions to demand from employers the soft skills required for in-depth evaluations and to ease the planning of curriculum development for minimizing the skills gaps, to improve employability, thus producing better fit graduates for the industries. According to Siavapalan et al. (2012), mismatches in soft skills have three-prong implications, HEIs need to be aware of appropriate skills wanted in the labour market to develop adequate curriculum, while more on-the-job training should also be implemented by employers; moreover, graduates are urged to actively participate in personal development in enhancing soft skills as lifelong learning. The researchers also pointed out that continuous surveying enables further information to be provided for all stakeholders involved to effectively impart soft skills development. This study not only acts as useful information to local Sarawakians, but also in hope of impacting future graduates, industry players, and relevant stakeholders nationwide as well as globally. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen seamless educational platforms blooming, E-learning courses encompassed any subjects, knowledge, and skills, even under the threats of the current pandemic, soft skills can be taught and learned as long as the desire to commit lifelong learning persists.

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