Abstract – This study aims to investigate the impacts of soft skills possessed by graduates from a public university on their employment opportunity. Previous studies revealed that soft skills are crucial for their employability. A total of 234 graduates were selected as the sample of this study. The data analysis by SPSS found that employability was positively associated with leadership skills, teamwork skills, and communication skills. Furthermore, leadership skills possessed by graduates have the strongest influence on employment opportunities among the three independent variables. The study adds more information to the current debate in this area and provides practical contributions to the management of the university, particularly in planning various students’ upskilling programmes to increase the rate of graduate employability. The findings suggest that the university should focus on leadership, teamwork, and communication skills in the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Graduate Employability, Soft Skills, Business Students.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there is an increasing emphasis being placed on soft skills in the workplace. Employees can develop their soft skills by participating in various training programmes at their workplace. Besides that, higher education institutions also play an important role in developing soft skills (Kyllonen, 2013). According to Nusrat and Sultana (2019), competitiveness in the current marketplace and soft skills are “must-have” skills. A student’s soft skill can be defined as his or her abilities, skills, traits, attitudes, behaviour personality, rather than technical knowledge. Soft skills have been considered as one of the crucial qualities sought in the corporate world. John (2009) mentions that modern corporations demand candidates who have the knowledge and soft skills that can be beneficial to the organisation.
The Department of Statistics, Malaysia revealed that the average unemployment rate was 5 (3.3%) in Malaysia from year 2015 until 2019. During this period, most of the graduates did not get a job due to the lack of basic soft skills required by the employers. It is important for university students to have extra skills rather than academic knowledge (Credé & Kuncel, 2008). The employers perceive that students are not prepared to face the workplace and they expect the universities to improve and produce more employable graduates (Spowart, 2011). The skills can be achieved through various activities or programmes related to the teaching and learning process.

The teaching and learning methods must be properly planned, organised, and executed at the universities to enhance the academic competence of students in every aspect such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. From the programme, students can improve their soft skills before facing pursuing their careers. Unemployment among graduates can be overcome by gaining employability skills and technical skills. Many solutions can improve the skills of graduates regarding their marketability. Hence, the government can encourage Malaysian students to improve their soft skills that can improve the economic level and motivate fresh graduates to become more successful with better soft skills. Most graduates have to deal with obstacles in getting a job because they have to compete with others who have excellent soft skills. Programmes on learning methods should be organised in universities to improve the academic competence of the students in all aspects. This approach can help students to develop and polish their skills for their career as effective skills training can produce graduates who are educated and skilful. According to Nusrat and Sultana (2019), soft skills are “must-have” skills due to the competitive nature in the current marketplace for job seekers.

This paper aims to explore the importance of soft skills by investigating their effects on graduate employability before suggesting the best skills. This study focuses on three elements, namely communication skills, teamwork skills, and leadership skills. Soft skills have been appointed as a set of crucial skills required by future work in the corporate world. As stated by John (2009), modern corporations often seek candidates who possess this set of skills that are beneficial to the organisation. The purpose of this study is to promote awareness among university students in equipping themselves with related soft skills before pursuing their careers. The skills are beneficial in equipping graduates to become more competitive and efficient at their workplace.

The objective of this study is to investigate the effects of soft skills on the employability among Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) graduates. It is believed that this study will help the students to become aware of the importance of the required soft skills. They should know that graduates with better soft skills have a better chance of their career compared to those who lack the skills. This study has four research objectives and four research questions to achieve the aim:

2. Literature Review
Soft skills are considered as people's skills or personality-specific skills. Soft skills are non-technical and intangible which are also known as personality-specific skills that can determine an individual's strength as a leader, listener, negotiator, and conflict mediator. Soft skills are the traits and abilities of attitude and behaviour rather than knowledge or technical aptitude (John, 2009). Soft skills are skills that add more value to the hard skills equipped by an individual. The skills are not a substitute for hard or technical skills, but they act as harmonising skills that unlock the prospective for highly effective performance in people with good hard skills.

2.1 Leadership Skills

According to Crowne (2019), leadership is a process of influencing others and it is an important resource for any group. Sheriff et al. (2017) define leadership as the art of motivating a group of people to achieve a common goal. Gerhardt (2019) states that the research serves as an intervention between students’ leadership and their confidence in employment. The research was conducted in London and used the qualitative method which has been used as a module across nine disciplines and numerous projects on leadership. The sample used five group leaders among the students which were evaluated using content analysis for planning phase, learning, and reflection. The project was conducted in week 2 during the tutorial session which emphasize on leadership topic. This phase takes approximately a week to complete the methodology. The reflection of the group is on their experiences, work-based application, and knowledge. This study hypothesised that leadership skills would positively affect employment among graduates.

Nolan-Arañez and Ludvik (2018) mention that a leader’s perspective on leadership development activities can influence the employability rate among graduates. The research was conducted in the United States of America (USA) and used the qualitative method. The sample was ten students who were leaders during the Spring programme 2015 — the students were paired with a mentor to complete the leadership development programme within two months. The programme has four sections which are leadership workshop, self-assessment, community service painting murals, and reflection paper. The community service required students to paint with disabled individuals. Next, Nga and Wai Mun (2013) studied the effect of leadership towards the organizational changed among business students and the result showed that there was a highly correlated between leadership and organization change between them.

According to Kelly (2017), undergraduate students need to be well-equipped in facing their profession in the future. This research was conducted in Australia and used the qualitative approach. The sample for this research was 100 respondents from the university. The section describes the leadership skills of graduates in Australia. The section is based on the week that they want to conduct their research. The researcher took seven weeks to complete the study and found that leadership skills are critical for the students. The respondents provided their opinion on important leadership skills to pursue their careers. Therefore, the study hypothesised the following:
H1: Leadership skills will positively affect employment among graduates.

2.2 Teamwork Skills

Teamwork can affect the performance and effectiveness of an organisation when the team members have abilities, knowledge, and skills by working in teams (Hanaysha, 2016). Furthermore, Gerhardt (2019) studied on the proficiency of soft skills towards employability among students. This research was conducted in Tanzania using the quantitative approach. The questionnaires were answered by 221 respondents in the Institute of Social Work (ISW) who were in their final year for bachelor's degrees and postgraduate degrees. The researcher used a two-sample test to examine the teamwork skill of the individuals. The result revealed a significant positive correlation between teamwork skills and employment among university students. Therefore, the study hypothesised that teamwork skills would positively affect employment among graduates.

According to Majid, Liming, Tong, and Raihana (2012), there was a correlation between students’ perception of the importance of soft skills towards employment. This research was conducted in Singapore and used the quantitative method to collect data from four universities in Singapore. The survey focused on teamwork skills among the four universities on 188 students from several courses. The findings revealed a positive correlation for the importance of soft skills in teamwork skills towards employability. Therefore, the study hypothesised that teamwork skills would positively affect employment among graduates. Riebe, Roepen, Santarelli, and Marchioro (2010) identified the effectiveness of university programmes in teaching students about teamwork skills and future employment. This research was conducted in Australia using quantitative approaches which are questionnaires and two online surveys. The research revealed the positive correlation for the effectiveness of university programmes towards employability. Therefore, the study hypothesised that teamwork skills will positively affect the employment among graduates.

Nusrat and Sultana (2019) identified the most desired soft skills sought by recruiters for business graduates in employment and potential candidates. The study was done in Bangladesh using a quantitative approach that focuses on university-level business education institutes and recruiters of entry-level business graduates. The result showed a positive correlation between all the soft skills to sustain employment among business graduates. Therefore, the study hypothesises the following:

H2: Teamwork skills will positively affect employment among graduates.

2.3 Communication Skills
Communication is defined as a process to understand the environment and themselves from the characteristic that happens in levels non-conscious, semi-conscious and conscious (Salleh, Sulaiman, Mohamad & Sern, 2017). Oussii and Klibi (2017) stated that there is a correlation between communication skills and employment. This research was conducted in Australia on 180 students. The students were divided into two groups. First, different profiles of students were classified based on their average grade. Second, the classification was made based on the different students’ socio-economic profiles. The study found that there was a significant association between communication skills and employment profession after graduating. Therefore, the study hypothesised that communication skills would positively affect employment among graduates.

Salleh et al. (2017) mentioned that there is a correlation among the soft skills like collaboration skills, communication skills, and entrepreneurship towards employment. This study was conducted in Malaysia using the quantitative approach. The respondents were selected based on the predetermined criteria, including the respondents should be students or lecturers from the five different institutions. The questionnaires were distributed online and obtained 534 responses. The study used a cross-sectional design to collect data from the respondents. The findings reveal high mean score values in communication skills which explains the importance of communication skills towards employment after graduating. Therefore, the study hypothesised that communication skills would positively affect employment among graduates.

Third, Hassall, Arquero, Joyce, and Gonzalez (2013) show further evidence of a positive relationship between communication skills and employment among students. This result was obtained from questionnaires answered by students in the United Kingdom (UK). There had two questionnaires: 1) the first is about oral communication; and 2) the second is the questionnaire used to measure written and oral communication. The findings revealed that there is a strong relationship between communication skills and employment among the students. The study hypothesised that communication skills would positively affect employment among graduates. According to San-Valero et al. (2018), there is a relationship between communication skills and employment in an engineering course. They utilised a qualitative approach by selecting a sample from students who are pursuing Master’s degree in engineering programme in the United States of America (USA). The training focused on verbal, non-verbal, written, and graphical communication. The students were asked randomly in an open session in which they have to make a short video that supports the documentation. The lecturers also assisted the students for the responses. Therefore, the study hypothesised the following:

H3: Communication skills will positively affect employment among graduates.
2.4 Employability

Employability is a set of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that contribute to the individuals’ security and successfulness to be selected in their chosen career for the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy (O’Leary, 2013). According to O’Leary (2013), there is a positive soft skill collaboration on the opportunity to get employed among the graduates. This research was conducted in London using both qualitative and quantitative methods with primary research that added some material for debate and secondary research that obtained previous works. The sample was 104 graduates from different universities. The findings revealed a positive correlation between soft skill indication and employment needed by university students.

Stewart, Wall, and Marciniec (2016) stated that soft skills are considered the most valuable for preparing graduates for employment. The research was conducted in the UK using the qualitative approach. The sample was 214 college students from four universities in which 45.8% of the respondents were seniors, 52.8% of them were juniors, and the remaining respondents were random students. The findings revealed a positive correlation for the soft skills in preparing students for employment after graduating.

Camps and Rodríguez (2011) found a correlation between individuals’ performance and their transformational leadership behaviour towards employment. The employability is considered as an individual’s phenomenon that is mediated by organisational learning capability. The sample was 795 students in Spain which were analysed using the quantitative method. The findings revealed a positive correlation between worker-perceived organisational, employability perceptions, leadership, perception, and performance that have a significant influence on employment.

3. Methodology of the Study

The study utilised the quantitative research design to examine the causal effects on a set of predictors towards the outcome variable. The target population of the study is graduates from bachelor in the business programme, University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). The population has four cohorts of graduates from year 2015 until 2018 with a total of 590 students as follows: 81 students in 2015, 111 students in 2016, 218 students in 2017, and 180 students in 2018. The survey was distributed to them with 20% response rate or 140 responses.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the research objectives to measure the influence of communication skills, leadership skills, and team skills on job opportunities among graduates. This study had 140 respondents and obtained the consistency reliability or the
Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients of the three independent and dependent variables as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Skills</td>
<td>.752</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork Skills</td>
<td>.806</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>.873</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results reveal that the Cronbach’s alpha values for the following: 1) 0.752 for the nine items of leadership skills; 2) 0.806 for the twelve items of teamwork skills; and 3) 0.873 for the nine items of communication skills. The internal consistency reliability of the measure used in this study can be considered as good. The result means that the questionnaire regarding leadership skills, teamwork skills, and communication skills is acceptable.

The mean values for employment among UMK graduates (DV) are 4.5929. The result means that most of the respondents agreed with the employment among UMK graduates. The standard deviation for the dependent variable (employment) is 0.39139 and the mean value for leadership skills is 4.3000. The result reveals that the respondents agreed that leadership skills influence employment among UMK graduates. The standard deviation for leadership skills is 0.48280 and the mean value for the teamwork skills is 4.4071. The respondents agreed that perceived usefulness has positively contributed to employment among UMK graduates. The standard deviation for leadership skills is 0.46297 and the mean value for communication skills is 4.2714. The result means that most of the respondents agreed that communication skills influence employment among UMK graduates with the standard deviation of 0.54102. The normality for this study is not normal because the result is lower than 0.05. This issue might be due to the focus on students from UMK only. This normality is referred from Shapiro-Wilk. The assumption for normality data is violated due to the sufficiently large sample size that reduces the effects of non-normality. According to Joseph F Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (1998), larger sample sizes reduce the detrimental effects of non-normality.
Table 3: Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>t-statistics</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>VIF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>19.253</td>
<td>4.463</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>.509</td>
<td>4.690</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1.589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork skills</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>2.400</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>1.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>.252</td>
<td>2.930</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>1.608</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Employability

Regression Model:

Employment = 19.253 + 0.509Leadership + 0.219Teamwork + 0.252Communication + \( \varepsilon \)

Research Model:

![Diagram showing relationships between skills and employability](#)

Note: * coefficients are significant at \( p < 0.05 \)
** coefficients are significant at \( p < 0.01 \)

The results from the multiple linear regression analysis show that there is a significant linear positive relationship between leadership skills and employment; thus, supporting H1. For every increase in the unit of leadership, the employment will increase by 0.509 (adjusted \( b=0.51, 95\%, CI 0.29, 0.72, p<0.001 \)) and this result shows that teamwork skills and communication skills are constant. Next, there is a significant linear positive relationship between teamwork skills and employment; hence, supporting H2. For every increase in the unit of teamwork, the employment will increase by 0.219 (adjusted \( b=0.22, 95\%, CI 0.04, 0.39, p<0.001 \)). This result shows that leadership skills and communication skills are constant. There is a significant linear positive relationship between communication skills and employment; thus, supporting H3. For every increase
in the unit of communication, the employment will increase by 0.252 (adjusted b=0.25, 95%, CI 0.08, 0.42, p<0.001). This result shows that leadership skills and teamwork skills are constant. Furthermore, 45.5% of the variation in employment is explained by leadership skills, communication skills, and teamwork skills according to the multiple linear regression model (R²=0.455).

Lastly, the VIF value of leadership skills is 1.59, teamwork skills is 1.63, and communication skills is 1.61. There are argument about the VIF that accepted <10, but some papers mention that the limit of VIF is only 5. Joseph F. Hair (2018) stated that the maximum level for VIF is 10, whereas Ecke, Bergman, and Lagerkvist (1998) agreed that the maximum level for VIF is 5. This result is acceptable based on the argument by Hair (2018) and Ecke et al. (1998). The VIF for all independent variables are less than 10 and less than 5. Hence, they are unbiased or free from any multicollinearity issue.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the effects of possessing the three basic soft skills (i.e., leadership skills, teamwork skills, and communication skills) among graduates on employability. The findings suggested that all the independent variables are crucial factors to enhance the employability of UMK students. The four objectives in Chapter 1 reveal that employability has a relationship with all the independent variables on employment among graduates.

The first objective shows that the soft skills that have the most influence on graduates employment are leadership skills. The second objective, which is leadership skills, can affect employment among graduates. For the third and fourth objectives, which are teamwork and communication skills, they have an impact on employment among graduates. Good soft skills are very important for employment among graduates.

The outcome of the study revealed that all the independent variables affect employability among graduates. Overall, the first objective identified leadership skills as the skills that have the most effect on employability. The second, third, and fourth objectives revealed that the relationship between leadership skills, teamwork skills, and communication skills affect the employability among graduates. According to the previous research, it can be concluded that soft skills are important in ensuring the employability and marketability of the students. Therefore, they must focus on improving their soft skills, particularly leadership skills, teamwork skills, and communication skills to enhance the employability of graduates.

This research can be used for business schools such as universities and colleges to improve their education module so that graduates can secure their jobs after completing their studies. The acquired knowledge and the skills from the university will help them in seeking jobs. Universities can ensure the development of roles and projects that allow students to challenge themselves besides providing training programmes that offer on-
the-job opportunities for growth. Engaging students at all levels with strategic direction and decision-making will also encourage them to pursue the leadership roles. Graduates have a strong desire for clarity in their career development. Furthermore, another task-based method for improving student communication skills can be done through critical thinking exercises. This method can be done verbally or written form so that the students can answer the questions using their words and expressions. Lastly, all members need to contribute to the project with their assigned task for teamwork.

Furthermore, this study can be used for study purposes. The findings will be valuable to university or college students who want to research on the importance of soft skills towards students. All the collected and analysed data are valid. The independent variable shows a positive relationship with the dependent variables. It is believed that more factors need to be included in the research model besides leadership skills, teamwork skills, and communication skills in affecting employability among graduates. Lastly, future researchers should explore other factors that may interact with soft skills.

6. Limitation and Suggestions for Future Research

The study is limited to the graduates in a business programme in Malaysia. Therefore, future studies should consider expanding the study area and collecting information from both business and non-business students. This strategy will provide comparative results and produce interesting insights.

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References


