


# Graduates' Competencies and Employability: A Conceptual Framework <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** Higher education is one of the institutions that have been widely recognized as major contributors to sustainable economic growth. In the global world today, changes occur frequently from time to time, and it has become more difficult to keep up with current trends. Through the process of educational studies from higher educational universities, people's knowledge is increasing, and they have to make the right decision in choosing the careers that are most suitable for them. Employability skills play an important role in order to ensure that they will be acceptable in the job market. Employability skills can be defined as those basic skills required for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job or task in which they responsible for. Generally, employability skills are needed by students to prepare themselves to meet the needs of job market requirements after their graduation. It is essential for any program of study at higher educational institutions to evaluate its curriculum regularly to ensure that its content remains relevant, is of high quality, and responds to the demand of the job market. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to determine the relationship between graduates' competencies and their employment and second, to propose a conceptual framework underlying the interrelationship between graduates' competencies and their employment. A structured literature review methodology was adopted, and a conceptual model was developed for further exploration of the topic

**Keywords:** graduates' employability; graduates' competencies; employability; job satisfaction; graduates



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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, higher education is one of the institutions that have been widely recognized as major contributors to sustainable economic growth. The sector of higher educational institutions has produced graduates with certain skills that are needed by the industry and enable them to produce many research and development activities. This is important for the sustainable growth of companies and country development. In a global world today, changes occur frequently from time to time and it has become more difficult to keep up with current trends.

Graduates should have a set of achievements such as skills, knowledge, and others attributes in order to allow them to expand their employment and success in their work. It will give benefits to themselves, the organization in which they serve, and to the country's economy as a whole [1]. As stated by [2], it is important and compulsory for universities and graduates as they need to learn and adopt new skills to get their expected job. According to [3], employability has three major aspects, which include career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. Career identity involves role identity, occupational identity, and organizational identity. Personal adaptability, which is willingness to change personal factors and social and human capital, is making investments in social and human capital in expectation of future returns in the workplace.

Through the process of educational studies from higher educational universities, people's knowledge is increasing and they have to make the right decision in choosing the careers that are most suitable for them. As we are in the global world, we are moving into the information world nowadays, or what we called the 'Information Age'. This change and transition is considered as one movement that will provide an emerging market for information professionals. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to determine the relationship between graduates' competencies and their employment and second, to propose a conceptual framework underlying the interrelationship between graduates' competencies and their employment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Graduates' Competencies

Being new to the job market can be extremely tough, especially when employers and managers have plenty of choices of graduates applying for the job or position that they are offered. To ensure that employers will select them, the graduates must have good traits and attributes. As shown in the previous studies, it is important for the graduates to have good traits in order for them to be selected. As found by [4], responsibility traits, integrity traits, and being dependable and taking initiatives are the most important entry level of personality traits usually sought by employers. Building on that, [5] mentioned that the behaviors, attitudes, and work values of employees might be influenced by their historical, social, and economic experiences. Graduates' skills are more important than degree performance, as the recruitment process requires employees to apply their skills, and this concerns the employer as they want a worker who is equipped with some attributes such as interactive, personal [6], and other generic skills [7]. This finding has also been supported by [8], who have revealed that for some employers, a degree may now not represent anything more than a minimum requirement, in addition to other evidence of suitability. The concept of employability has been associated with workplace necessities and the higher education context also addressed the issues of graduate competencies or graduate employability [9].

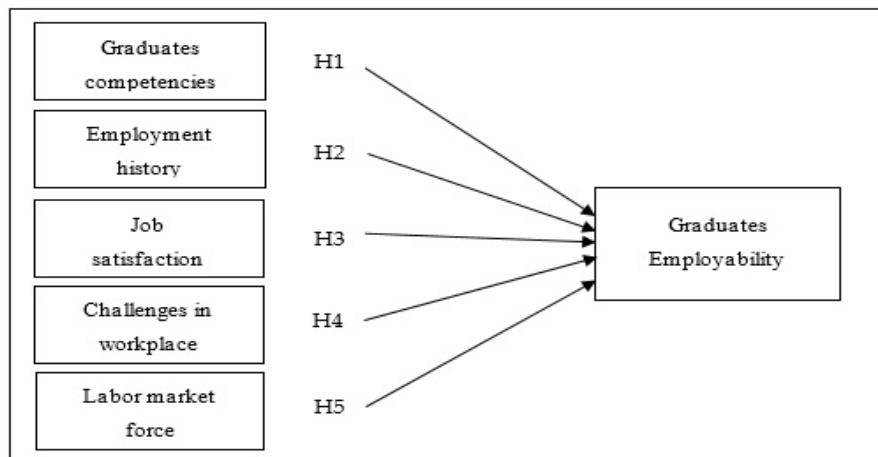
### 2.2. Employability

The term employability is being used in correlation with other terms such as key skills, core skills, competencies, employability skills, generic skills, workplace know-how, critical enabling skills, transferable skills, key qualifications, trans-disciplinary goals, and process-independent qualifications [10]. According to [11], employability is a set of achievements, skills, and personal attributes that allow graduates to more easily gain employment, which benefits themselves, their workforce, the community, and the economy. In this present study, graduates are categorized according to the employability problem if they find it hard to gain employment after six months of their graduation. As stated by [12], employability is the situation in which the graduates are able to gain their initial employment, they can maintain their employment, and also can get new job if required. They are also capable to move and upgrade themselves within the labor market in order for them to realize their potential through a sustainable environment. To be employed, an individual should have knowledge, skills, and attitudes and they should know how to use those assets to make themselves well-presented in front of the employers.

## 3. Conceptual Model

Based on the literature search, five independent variables were identified, namely employment history/status, graduates' competencies, job satisfaction, challenges in the workplace, and labor market force. This research model adopts the theory of analytical dimensions of employability by [13]. This theory was chosen because it discusses how employability can be affected by the labor market institution, skills, and knowledge enhanced by education and training. In this study, five factors are considered as independent variables: graduates' competencies, job satisfaction, challenges in the workplace, employ-

ment history, and labor market force, and this research examined each of these variables as an element that should be focused on in conducting the study of the employability of undergraduate students. Figure 1 below shows the framework that was developed based on the literature review and research problem.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model.

Being new to the job market can be extremely tough, especially when employers and managers have plenty of choices of graduates applying for the job or position that they are offered. Employers also recognize that valuable employees are quickly becoming a rare product [14]. No matter the position, field, or profession, valuable employees will always be the choices of employers. It not only depends on the skills and talent that they have, but also from their good records, which are usually different and more established than their friends. Building on that, Ref. [5] mentioned that the behaviors, attitudes, and work values of employees might be influenced by their historical, social, and economic experiences. Attitude plays a vital role in every job we perform. Graduates who will engage in the job environment should also have teamwork skills. Teamwork is defined as the ability of people to work effectively individually as well as in a group, with the ability to be a team leader or manager [15]. Graduates should have a strong sense of self, confidence, high self-esteem, and a comprehensive knowledge of the company goals. It is supported by [16], as reported in their article. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

**H1.** *Graduates’ competencies have a positive and significant relationship with graduate employability.*

After graduating, the student usually will find a job related to the course they took at university. However, not all of the graduates get a job relevant to the field of their study. To some extent, they have to grab any opportunities that come to them as long as they are employed. In today’s labor market, the degree qualification they got from the university was not promising them the job that they want, even if there is a link between what is studied and the labor market. At the workplace, the graduates will learn new things other than what they have learnt in class, and it will give them opportunities to upgrade themselves for the highest position available. As mentioned by (14), from their survey on the employment experiences of graduates from the University of New South Wales LIS programs for the years 1997–2000, report data indicated that 25.8% of respondents occupied a librarian position in their first job experience, utilizing information management skills. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

**H2.** *Employment history has a positive and significant relationship with graduate employability.*

Job satisfaction has been of interest to organizational researchers, as it has a strong relationship with job performance and organizational commitment. As proven by [17], employees spend their time in doing their job and it affects their lives in general. It was supported by [18] in their study that promotion is the most significant factor affecting

job satisfaction. According to [19], the personality style and job satisfaction of librarians are related in various types of libraries and other information professional fields. It was found that optimism, emotional strength, an ability to work in a team, visionary work style, and work drive are the personality factors that are positively related to job satisfaction. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

**H3.** *Job satisfaction has a positive and significant relationship with graduate employability.*

Employees in many sectors in which they are employed face challenges and demands mostly from the technological development in information services. Technology has changed the traditional practice and roles of the information professional, as it requires them to have basic computer skills in doing their job in order to provide good services to users. The rapid changes of technology allow professional workers to grab opportunities in order to grow their career development. The profession of library and information services is rapidly changing, with a lot of challenges, especially for fresh graduates, as they need to adapt to the new demands [20]. Building on [21], the application of information technology in the workplace seems to be a common phenomenon in the 21st century in some sectors such as banking, railways, insurance, and airways. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

**H4.** *Challenge in the workplace has a positive and significant relationship with graduate employability.*

The job market is defined as the total population of working people who are willing and able to work and have officially entered the labor market, whereas labor force is referring to the individuals who are actively seeking a job [22]. Higher education and the labor market have traditionally connected, although sometimes in loose and intangible ways [23]. The availability of employment opportunities is extremely influenced by the labor markets. Nowadays, many countries are facing the economy crisis and Malaysia is one of those countries. This crisis resulted in the issues of employability, as it has been discussed for a long time that job demands have been decreased and the employment rate has been reduced due to the current economic situations. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

**H5.** *Labor market force has a positive and significant relationship with graduate employability.*

#### **4. Conclusions**

This study was conducted with two purposes: first, to determine the relationship between graduates' competencies and their employment and second, to propose a conceptual framework underlying the interrelationship between graduates' competencies and their employment. A structured literature review methodology was adopted, and a conceptual model was developed for further exploration of the topic. Based on the literature search, five independent variables were identified, namely employment history/status, graduates' competencies, job satisfaction, challenges in the workplace, and labor market force. Next, the conceptual model of the study was proposed, and discussions were made on each hypothesis.

The next stage of this research is to validate the conceptual research model in a quantitative study. For this quantitative research, the format instrument will be used as the data can be easily generalized to the object being analyzed. Descriptive research design is integrated into the questionnaires, and this research will collect the data for the purpose of hypotheses testing in order to answer the questions of the current status of respondents. A tracer study will also be conducted as part of the data collection. SPSS will be used to analyze the data from the questionnaire. An appropriate instrument and research design will be tested through various statistical analysis tests, such as reliability analysis using descriptive and inferential methods, such as frequency, cross-tabulation, ANOVA, Cronbach's Alpha, Harmann Single-Factor Test, Pearson's Correlation, and Multiple Regression.

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