

# Preparing Graduates for Employment

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Much has been said about graduate unemployment and the growing job mismatch of graduates and their qualifications. These issues are nothing new. What is worrying is the fact that at the heart of the conundrum lies the quality of the graduates themselves. This is one of the major findings of a study conducted by a team of researchers from Universiti Sains Malaysia recently.

Led by the Deputy Dean of Graduate Studies and Research of the School of Humanities, Professor Ambigapathy Pandian the study, entitled “University Curriculum: An evaluation on preparing graduates for employment” seeks to determine and help overcome the problems of graduate unemployment, particularly local graduates in arts and related fields. In addition, the study attempts to ascertain the types of personalities and skills required by employers and the extent to which the levels of personalities, skills and abilities of local graduates meet the requirements of employers. To achieve these, the team surveyed employers, undergraduates, graduates and university administrators.

According to Ambigapathy, the study reveals that graduates today lack personal qualities and communication skills and are not able to market themselves. Many of them are not dynamic enough and tend to shun non-academic activities which can help to enhance their soft skills.

In terms of communication skills, the study finds that employers give more emphasis to skills in English, compared to Bahasa Malaysia. In addition, employers expect their employees to possess ‘people skills’ such as the ability to persuade clients, the ability to negotiate and the ability to demonstrate friendliness and politeness in social settings.



Research Team “University Curriculum Study”

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in 1996, 1997 and 1998, only 3.7 percent obtained admissions into public institutions of higher learning. The small percentage of admissions does not mean that candidates from religious schools were not sufficiently qualified. The truth of the matter is that places for them in such institutions are very limited. Therefore, the fact that there are IPIHLs is opportune.

## Conclusion

With the economic boom in the early part of the second-half of 90s', the demand for higher education was very encouraging. The drastic increase in the number of places in higher education offered by the private sector is not inevitable but equally opportune. The establishment of IPIHLs is also in the wave of the increase in the number of private higher education institutions. At present most of those surveyed are still operating effectively. Some are facing a variety of problems, not least that of securing recognition for their programmes from Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN). That may be so in some instances, however these IPIHLs together with other products of institutions of higher learning in this country, are believed to be continuously blossoming and must be strongly supported. IPIHLs have offered another product to our education system and arguably contribute significantly towards our quest in becoming an international center of excellence in education.

## (Endnotes)

This article derives from a study entitled "Islamic Private Higher Learning Institutions and the Supply of 'Integrated' Manpower" conducted under Intensification of Research in Priority Areas (IRPA). Besides the present author, other researchers involved in this study are Assoc. Professor Mohd Radzi Othman (project leader), Professor Muhammad Syukri Salleh, Professor Shukery Muhamed, Assoc. Professor Norizan Md. Nor, and Assoc. Professor Ismail Omar. It should be noted though that a substantial part of this article is based on the part of the above mentioned research report written by the present author himself.

This refers to a consultation report entitled "Kajian Kemasukan Pelajar-Pelajar Aliran Agama ke Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Awam Malaysia" prepared by National Higher Education Research Institute in 2001. This report was based on a research conducted by Professor Muhammad Syukri Salleh, Professor Dato' Abdullah Muhammad Zin, Assoc. Professor Fadhil Hj. Othman, Dr. Nailul Murad Mohd. Nor and Ku Halim Ku Ariffin.

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Personal qualities deemed highly important by employers are having self-confidence, being dedicated and committed as well as being responsible, reliable and trustworthy.

Ambigapathy points out that interviews with university lecturers and employers reveal that the abovementioned-sought-after skills are greatly lacking among local graduates. The fact that they do not have these skills may well have contributed to the difficulties faced by graduates in obtaining employment. The study demonstrates, in selecting applicants, employers gave more weight to soft skills and less weight to paper qualifications.

Ambigapathy believes that currently there is insufficient emphasis in the university curriculum on soft skills and that more needs to be done to help graduates become marketable and competitive.

The government's recent proposal to aid fresh graduates in finding jobs by making available special vocational training in vocational institutes and encouraging them into internship programmes are consistent with the results of the study. The study indicates that practical training is important. In fact, it reveals that graduates of foreign universities, who have worked whilst studying, have good work related knowledge. Similarly, local graduates, who have worked part time, also have the right work-related attitude.

The study highlights the role of universities in preparing graduates for employment. The findings indicate that the universities and industry must play their respective roles if graduates are to be prepared for employment. According to Ambigapathy, "It is the duty of the universities to generate general knowledge and knowledge related to the field of specialization, but it is the duty of the industry to provide practical training. This is because requirements for new skills are constantly and rapidly changing. The onus therefore lies with the industry to ensure that their employees are equipped with the required skills. The universities should not be seen like a supermarket churning out products as demanded."

While the public in general have vehemently accused the universities for producing 'learned' local graduates who lack the necessary soft skills for employment, it is clear from Ambigapathy's thoughts and his team's curriculum study that the role of preparing graduates for employment does not and should not rest solely on the universities. The problem of graduate unemployment is multifaceted and addressing it objectively and successfully requires the active involvement of various "interested" agencies. Perhaps only through mutual understanding and, concerted and appropriate positive approaches by the different agencies, that the central issue of local graduates' inability to obtain employment in the present economic climate could be successfully addressed and consequently resolved.