

ASSESSING THE PERCEIVED SKILLS OF TERTIARY ACCOUNTING STUDENTS BY EMPLOYERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate employers' perceptions of accounting students' skills. The research was carried out using an online survey distributed to employers where accounting students are completing their internship programme. The sample consists of 90 accounting students who participated in the internship programme in various states during the 2022/2023 semester. The survey evaluates skills such as communication, critical thinking, and the ability to work independently. The findings of this study showed that students need to improve their skills in technical knowledge, technical report, and communication in English. The study's findings will have significant implications for higher learning institutions (HLI) and policymakers seeking to improve the alignment of education and the workforce. Through their academic curricula, HLI should provide more opportunities for students to develop soft skills.

Keywords: employer's expectation, graduate employability, internship, knowledge application, student skill

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Graduate students often encounter difficulties in developing job-market skills due to the emphasis of HLI programs on theoretical knowledge and research capabilities, which prove inadequate for them to attain practical experience or fully grasp the practical application of theory within real-world business contexts. Some programmes provide little exposure to industry, so students have little interaction with industry professionals to learn how to deal with real-world issues. Most HLI programmes assess communication skills in terms of writing and speaking through written projects and presentations, but the evaluation may be more on the contents, and communication is only a small portion of the overall assessment rubric. While mastering these skills holds utmost importance for the job market, potential solutions to enhance students' communication abilities might not receive adequate attention.

An internship holds significant educational value as it allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. The primary aims of an internship encompass offering students hands-on learning chances and exposure to real-life situations within their chosen field of study or profession, thereby fostering the development of their work ethics and competencies (Laguador et al., 2020). Identifying employer perceptions of student skills can provide valuable insights to HLI to improve graduate quality and empower students' job marketability. HLIs can become more aware of what skills students lack and how those skills

can be developed through external training programmes or embedded into academic programmes. It can also help in identifying gaps between the needs of graduates and those of employers and use them in strategic planning. This information can be used as an input in curriculum design that allows soft skills to be emphasised in academic programmes, hence making them relevant for the workforce. Identifying how employers evaluate student performance during internship training, provides leads to HLI whether the internship programmes meet the standards and expectations of the industry. This can help HLIs maintain high-quality internship programmes that provide students with valuable learning experiences. Furthermore, understanding how employers evaluate student performance during internship training can also help HLIs develop partnerships with organisations that offer internship opportunities. By demonstrating an understanding of the skills and knowledge that employers value, HLIs can position themselves as valuable partners for organizations seeking to recruit and develop talent. HLIs can also ensure that their internship programmes are effective, relevant, and meet the needs of the industry. This knowledge can help HLIs develop better curricula, maintain high-quality internship programmes, build partnerships, and provide better support to their students.

Currently, empirical research on internships often lacks detailed quantitative examination of various dimensions related to employer feedback, leaving us with an incomplete understanding of its effectiveness and implications. While it's widely acknowledged that feedback is crucial for intern development, there is a dearth of studies that rigorously assess the nature of feedback interns receive during their internship. Quantitative research could delve into how often interns are provided with feedback, whether it is primarily constructive or positive, and whether it addresses specific skills or overall performance.

The aim of this study is to ascertain employers' perceptions of the skills possessed by accounting students in eight areas: adherence to work requirements (AWR), interpersonal skills (IS), responsibility (R), general skills and motivation (GSM), job competency (JC), ability to communicate ideas (ACI), knowledge and understanding of concepts (KUC), and report writing ability (RWA). The results from this study are beneficial in curriculum design. Firstly, to include assessment in accounting courses that focus on developing skills, specifically the contents of assigned projects and rubrics. Secondly, faculty can provide career counselling that is more focused on the skills that students need to develop for a specific industry or career. Thirdly, faculty can concentrate on critical training needed to improve students' skills, and to collaborate with employers to provide students with industrial experience and networking opportunities.

1.1 Theory

Connectionism theory by Edward Thorndike is discussed in several research papers (Islam, 2015; Karadut, 2012; Manik, 2023). It offers valuable insights into how students develop skills and knowledge that are relevant to the job market. By recognizing the interconnected nature of learning, promoting transferable skills, emphasizing meaningful connections between different elements of knowledge, and leveraging adaptive learning systems, educators can better prepare students to navigate and succeed in the professional world.

Connectionism views learning as the formation and strengthening of connections between nodes in a network. In the context of skill development, this theory suggests that students acquire skills by building connections between different elements of knowledge, experiences, and problem-solving strategies. Understanding this interconnected nature of learning can help educators design curricula and instructional approaches that facilitate skill acquisition. The theory states that learning in one context can influence performance and skill development in another context. When students learn and practice skills in specific situations, the connections formed within their neural networks become more robust. This facilitates the transfer of

learned skills to novel situations, such as the job market. By understanding the principles of connectionism, educators can design learning experiences that promote transferable skills, enabling students to apply their knowledge and abilities effectively in various professional settings.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Possessing relevant skills for the chosen career may increase opportunities for career advancement, job satisfaction, and job market competitiveness. HLI frequently focuses on graduate marketability, or the graduate's ability to find work after graduation. Nonetheless, the mission should go beyond simply finding a job and should focus on how far they can advance in their careers. Higher productivity and job satisfaction will result from improved performance. It is more likely that they are satisfied with their work, which leads to a higher quality of life and a positive outlook on their career. They will also have a competitive advantage over other candidates or employees if they have the necessary skills.

Misni et al.(2020) examined the impact of curriculum design on Malaysian graduate employability competencies following Alias et al. (2013) arguments on effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies in developing highly sought-after employability skills among graduates. They found that curriculum vision, curriculum vision operationalisation, and curriculum delivery were all found to positively correlate with employability competency. Many graduates are unable to apply the knowledge they gained at HLI in their jobs and are less proficient in the English language (Hisamudin, 2022). Alshare and Sewailam (2018) identified a gap between student skills and employer needs because educators in HLI emphasise hard skills while employers emphasise soft skills. Hard skills include domain knowledge and technical skills, whereas soft skills include teamwork and interpersonal skills (Garousi et al., 2018). According to Aryanti and Adhariani (2020), there is an expectation gap between students and employers because students believe that honesty, continuous learning, and work ethics are important skills, but employers place a greater emphasis on teamwork, work ethics, and time management. Aside from the need to revise the accounting course curriculum, Arquero et al. (2022) stated that students' overconfidence or overestimation of their abilities has resulted in an expectation gap between graduate and employer expectations. Boyce et al. (2019) examined the curriculum of Australian and New Zealand HLIs and discovered that, despite the ongoing call to broaden the educational approach, the curriculum remains in the form of traditional technical and vocational focus. Similar findings from Cunha et al. (2022) who examined Portuguese HLIs accounting course, identified that their HLIs predominantly concentrate their curricular efforts on technical competencies and hard skills, rather than transversal skills. Razak et al. (2022) introduced gamification as an inventive approach to teaching and learning. Their study revealed that while this method enhanced students' performance, it did not uniformly affect the intrinsic motivation of all students. This is significant because Kadous and Zhou (2019) emphasized the importance of auditors' intrinsic motivation in improving their capacity to make precise judgments regarding complex accounting estimates. When auditors are motivated, they display a tendency to broaden their attention to encompass a wider range of information, engage in more meticulous information processing, and actively pursue additional evidence that holds relevance to the given scenario. Ibrahimi (2021) showed that when Active, Inquiry, and Deep Learning (AID) pedagogical approach is incorporated into creative and critical thinking course, student performance improved from fundamental active learning to more complex inquiry-based and deep learning approaches by the end of the course. The study identified that the students emerged as models of transformation, embodying altered thinking styles characterized by curiosity, systematic thinking, realism, and innovation.

According to empirical evidence, HLIs should also focus more on developing students' confidence and improving their ability to apply theoretical knowledge and practice (Roy, 2022), and provide students with active learning activities such as project-based and work-integrated

training (Phan et al., 2020). Overconfidence, defined as an overly optimistic assessment of one's abilities, could be one of the possible causes (Arquero et al., 2022). To improve graduate marketability, students should seek career advice on the skills required in their chosen field (Steed, 2018).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study examines all 90 students who are UiTM Cawangan Johor's final-year accounting degree students in the 2022/2023 batch who attend intern programmes in the industry. The respondents of the survey are the supervisors who closely work with the students during the internship period in the organisation.

To fulfil the general objective of this paper, we employ a descriptive research design to obtain information about the employer's perception of the skills possessed by our students. The descriptive design does not answer the why question but answers the what, when, where and how questions. We collect data through survey questions that contain Likert scale items (1= Poor, 2= Moderate, 3= Satisfactory, 4= Good, and 5= Excellent) where the employer will assess the student's skills. We refer to this assessment as Internship Evaluation Criteria (IEC). There are three sections in IEC, the first section is on the demographic information of students including the name and address of the company where the students undergo the internship program. The second section assesses students' competency, students' skills, and their knowledge. The final section is open questions asking employers' opinions on students' strengths and weaknesses. In the second section, questions to assess students' skills are divided into eight categories, (1) General skill and motivation consists of 2 items; (2) Job competency consists of 2 items; (3) Interpersonal skills consists of 2 items; (4) Responsibility consists of 2 items; (5) Compliance with working requirements consists of 4 items; (6) Knowledge and understanding of concepts consists of 3 items; (7) Report writing ability consists of 2 items, and (8) Communicating ideas consists of 4 items. Details of the items are presented in Table 2.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 reports the demographic statistics of the students. Most of the students are female. The internship is offered in six different locations, with Johor having the highest percentage of 35.6% and the lowest being only 4.4% in Wilayah Persekutuan.

Table 1. Demographic statistics

	N	%
Gender		
Male	15	16.7
Female	75	83.3
	90	100
Location		
Kuala Lumpur	9	10.0
Johor	32	35.6
Selangor	19	21.1
Negeri Sembilan	17	18.9
Melaka	9	10.0
Wilayah Persekutuan	4	4.4

Table 2 displays the average scores for items within each respective category. All feedbacks are above satisfactory. Mean values for some items under KUC, RWA and CI do not reach 4 (good), indicating that they were scored less than good. Under KUC, students scored low for business and technical knowledge; while under CI, communication in English received the

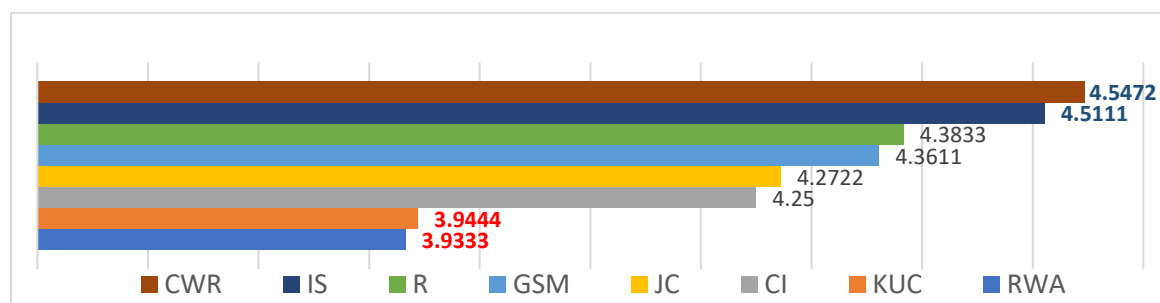
lowest mean value. These findings suggest that the students may not have extensive coursework in business and technical subjects leading to limited knowledge in these areas. If the internship requires a strong foundation in these fields, students with less exposure may struggle to meet the expected level of knowledge. While academic knowledge is valuable, practical experience plays a crucial role in developing proficiency in business and technical areas. Students who have not had previous opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios may find it challenging to bridge the gap between theory and practice during their internship. Communication in English is a common challenge for non-native English speakers. If students' language is not English, they may face difficulties in expressing themselves fluently or accurately, leading to lower scores in communication. This can affect their ability to effectively convey ideas, collaborate with colleagues, or present information during the internship. This is why Evans and Suklun (2017) highlighted a disparity in communication regarding the extent of interaction between individuals who are native speakers and those who are not. Employers and industry experts emphasize that in today's dynamic business environment, possessing technical expertise alone is insufficient. Outstanding teamwork, good communication, and robust analytical abilities hold equal significance (Arquero et al., 2023). Some students may possess the required knowledge and skills but struggle with self-confidence, particularly in unfamiliar or high-pressure situations. This lack of confidence can affect their performance in business and technical tasks as well as their ability to communicate effectively.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation
General skill and motivation (GSM)		
General capability to perform assigned tasks	4.2889	.58530
Willingness to learn and acquire knowledge	4.4333	.79394
Job competency (JC)		
Able to complete assigned tasks efficiently and effectively	4.2667	.66704
Able to meet assigned deadlines	4.2778	.67087
Interpersonal skills (IS)		
Relationship with peers/supervisor	4.4778	.65733
Ability to work in a team	4.5444	.62100
Responsibility (R)		
Job accountability of the trainee	4.3778	.78723
The trainee is committed to completing assigned tasks	4.3889	.77452
Compliance with working requirements (CWR)		
The trainee comes to work every working day	4.6333	.54977
Punctuality at work	4.6889	.57366
Willingness to work overtime	4.2000	.82380
The trainee is well-groomed and neat in appearance	4.6667	.51929
Knowledge and understanding of concepts (KUC)		
General knowledge	4.0778	.69067
Business knowledge	3.8556	.66300
Technical knowledge	3.9000	.67124
Report writing ability (RWA)		
Technical reports	3.9222	.70675
Non-technical reports	3.9444	.64235
Ability to communicate ideas (CI)		
In English (orally)	3.9000	.63688
In English (written)	4.0333	.67790
In Bahasa Malaysia (orally)	4.5667	.58155
In Bahasa Malaysia (written)	4.5000	.58540

Figure 1 illustrates the overall average for each of the eight categories. The highest mean received was CWR at 4.5472 suggesting that the students demonstrate positive attributes that are highly valued in professional settings. Their commitment to punctuality, willingness to work

extra hours, and attention to appearance indicate a strong work ethic, reliability, and professionalism, which can contribute to their success in the workplace in the future. Report Writing Ability (RWA) obtained the lowest mean score of 3.9333, indicating that faculty needs to identify method of improving these skills. Numerous studies have been undertaken to explore the potential efficacy of distinct pedagogical methods in enhancing students' writing abilities (Everaert & Safari, 2021; Hughes, 2017; Ong et al., 2022). Proficiency in writing is particularly crucial for accountants, given their involvement in composing annual reports, where the clarity of content may have implications for accounting integrity (Soepriyanto et al., 2021). Furthermore, the mean score of 4.03 for English writing suggests that students are proficient in general English writing; however, they may need to refine their abilities specifically in technical report writing. Non-native English speakers may encounter challenges in expressing themselves clearly and accurately in written form, which can stem from difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and overall coherence. Additionally, students may have limited prior experience in report writing before their internship, which necessitates practise and familiarity with the format, structure, and language conventions associated with effective report writing. Practical knowledge is crucial for transitioning into industrial roles (Sirisha et al., 2020), yet technical knowledge is equally essential as it forms the bedrock for crafting effective technical reports. According to Haris et al. (2021), a strong knowledge of the subject empowers students to convey information accurately and comprehensively in their reports. For instance, they stated that teaching financial auditing is challenging due to the need to comprehend testing, financial and management accounting, taxes, and audit procedures. Technical expertise allows them to analyse data, present findings, and draw informed conclusions or recommendations effectively.



CWR-Compliance with working requirements, IS-Interpersonal skills, R-Responsibility, GSM- General skill and motivation, JC-Job competency, CI-Ability to communicate ideas, KUC-Knowledge and understanding of concepts, RWA- Report writing ability.

Fig. 1 Average value across the eight supervisor evaluation categories

Consistent with Misni et al.'s (2020) findings that curriculum design has a positive effect on students' skill, HLI should incorporate activities and assignments that promote the development of skills that are highly valued by employers. Offer workshops, seminars, or dedicated courses that focus on enhancing the essential employability skills. HLIs could consider implementing remedial courses or workshops to support students in improving their skills in areas where they struggle, particularly in trainers' knowledge and understanding of concepts and report writing ability, which received the lowest scores. These courses would provide focused instruction and practice to help students establish a solid foundation of knowledge and skills. Throughout the course, students' abilities can be assessed at various stages, allowing for appropriate corrective measures to enhance their skills. Moreover, academic advisors can play a strengthened role by not only providing academic guidance and support but also offering encouragement and assistance to promote professional success. Advisors can help students identify areas of weakness and provide advice on study habits, time management, and other strategies to enhance their performance. To further support students, HLIs may consider establishing writing centres providing writing tutors who can offer personalised assistance to those in need of help with their writing skills. These resources can

greatly contribute to improving students' proficiency in crafting effective reports and other assignments. By offering targeted support and resources, HLIs demonstrate their commitment to helping students develop the necessary skills to excel in their chosen fields.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is to identify employers' perceptions of skills possessed by accounting students during their internship programmes. The skills are sorted into eight categories: Compliance with working requirements (CWR), Interpersonal skills (IS), Responsibility (R), General skill and motivation (GSM), Job competency (JC), Ability to communicate ideas (CI), Knowledge and understanding of concepts (KUC) and Report writing ability (RWA). The overall feedback received from the students is above satisfactory. However, it is worth noting that students need to improve their skills under the categories KUC, RWA, and CI as they fall below good rates. Specifically, within the KUC category, students scored low in terms of business and technical knowledge and RWA category, students scored low in technical report ability. Similarly, in the CI category, communication in English received the lowest mean value. These findings suggest that the students may have limited knowledge in business and technical subjects, and limited exposure could present challenges when the internship requires a strong foundation in these fields, as students may struggle to meet the expected level of knowledge. This study may suggest that HLI should develop training and development programmes that are closely aligned with the most in-demand skills and competencies. It will ensure that the HLI can produce holistic graduates who excel in both academics and job market quality.

While academic knowledge holds significance, practical experience plays a vital role in developing proficiency in business and technical areas. Students who have not had previous opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios may find it difficult to bridge the gap between theory and practice during their internship. Furthermore, communication in English poses a common challenge for non-native English speakers that may have an impact on their ability to effectively convey ideas, collaborate with colleagues, or present information during the internship. Building up confidence is also important as it may influence their performance in business and technical tasks, as well as their ability to communicate effectively. These weaknesses can be addressed through targeted interventions and support. Providing additional training, mentorship, language support, and opportunities for practical application can help students overcome these challenges and improve their performance during internships. The findings of this study indicate that the students exhibit a strong commitment to work requirements, reflecting their work ethic, reliability, and professionalism, which can contribute to their future success in the workplace. Given appropriate support and training, the students have the capacity to demonstrate commendable qualities and reach their full potential. Students have diverse learning styles and preferences. If the internship programme does not cater to their specific learning needs or fails to provide varied instructional methods, some students may struggle to grasp and apply business and technical knowledge effectively.

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