

# Little clarity to graduate employability criteria

By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - July 27, 2022 @ 12:00am



*Graduate employability has been a buzzword for a long time in trying to assert accountability over the education sector, especially in higher education. - NSTP file pic*

The Pandora's box on graduate employability was reopened recently on social media. The issue is not new but it did not matter until the pandemic came.

Today, it is more about being "permanently unemployed".

Graduate employability has been a buzzword for a long time in trying to assert accountability over the education sector, especially in higher education.

The basic assumption is that those educated must be able to contribute to the community. This is sound and laudable.

After all, the benefit out of money spent on the privileged few should be shared with the larger community. Community engagement is one such platform to do so.

But, over the years, as higher education turned more "elitist", it has become more industry-led.

Aligned to the needs of human capital, graduate employability is as one of the main key performance indicators (KPIs) of higher education.

Translated into Bahasa Malaysia as *kebolehpasaran*, it takes a life of its own as a correlation to what success means for higher education, albeit economically skewed.

It is tracked by a nationally devised Graduate Tracer Study, carried out annually six months after the students graduated from the university. Meaning, one is deemed to be "successful" upon being employed by the industry that one trained for.

Often the target set is at about 80 per cent. Overall, the context remains vague and tends to give rise to a number of contestations.

**First**, why the rise to 85 per cent? Is not the state of the job market important, as in the case for the pandemic for example, where many industries cut down on the number of jobs.

If not a total shutdown or going bust.

**Second**, the (mis)match between jobs to qualifications of the graduates.

Here the issues of under- or overemployment becomes real. Can a graduate with a degree in science doing non-science jobs be considered "gainfully employed" leading to a fulfilled life versus livelihood?

Worse, if it is a clerical level job that could be easily handled by diploma holders or equivalent.

**Third**, what or which industry? In the days where Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and wellbeing are defining the 21st century, would jobs offered by industry that violated these aspiration count, for example the tobacco industry or those that contribute to environmental pollution and degradation?

Similarly, the violation of human rights, like human trafficking in the rush to be employed in order to survive as exposed during the pandemic! Moreover, SDG 8 emphasises "decent work".

**Fourth**, what about the number of "universities" churning out surplus graduates exceeding the number of jobs created? In the case of Malaysia, the number can be as many as 450. Imagine how many jobs should there be to satisfy the graduate employability target.

Simply put, there is little clarity to the definition of graduate employability from the perspective of being "gainfully employed" to make impactful contributions to the community.

Adding on to this, is the expansion of graduate employability to include those undergoing training or upskilling programmes as well as those who are enrolled for further studies.

It tends to weaken the understanding of graduate employability by providing an escape route to manipulate the outcome.

By organising training or upskilling programmes, the KPI can be upgraded accordingly even to exceed the 85 per cent target set.

Universities that are more rigorous (read, ethical) in defining graduate employability as being "gainfully employed" have been called upon to account for not meeting the KPI.

Invariably, when urged to "improve" the reporting, the use of the escape route is very handy, especially when the state of the job market is deplorable.

Hence, what seems amiss is the reliability of the figures affixed by the current methodology and lack of clarity to measure graduate employability.

This is what the Pandora's box is pointing to this time — an honest response from those involved in measuring graduate employability.

For it to be impactful, graduate employability must not only embrace the notion of being "gainfully employed" but also be supported by good ethics.

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