

Integration of Workplace Readiness Skills into Tourism Educational Curriculum for Graduates' Employability

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Abstract

Tourism education has grown quite rapidly in line with the industry development today. Several valuable skills need to be highlighted by the educational institutions in order to produce tourism graduates with quality and efficient employability for future working environment. One of the essential skills needed by the graduates for future employability is workplace readiness skills. Taking the higher education in Malaysia as a case study, the objective of this study is to identify workplace readiness skills required by the industry to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability. This study surveyed 100 tourism sectors in Malaysia consisted of travel agents, restaurants, hotels and transportation sectors using quantitative method. Six domains represented the workplace readiness skills have been identified namely basic skills, using technology skills, practicality skills, business orientation skills, planning and organizing skills and self-management skills. The findings indicated that workplace readiness skills are important to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum. It was also noted that tourism education needs to integrate the practicality skills and planning and organizing skills into the course curriculum. This study contributes to the higher education in designing and preparing tourism education taking into account the workplace readiness skills to enhance graduates' employability. It further indicates the needs of collaboration between higher education and industry for future graduates' employability within the competitive environment.

Keywords: workplace readiness skills, graduate employability, tourism educational curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Graduates' employability plays vital role not just in determining the quality of graduates produced by the educational institutions as provider but further, it is also important for the industry to have an effective and comfortable workplace environment. In studies undertaken by Abdul Hamid et al. (2014) and Yusof and Jamaluddin (2015), they noted that the graduates' employability in Malaysia has been critically debated and is seen as a vital issue which need to be taken seriously not just by the policy-makers but particularly by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Moreover, HEIs are also responsible to enhance graduates' employability due to the fact that HEIs produce graduates to fulfil jobs demand in the labor markets (Abd Majid et al., 2020). However, the issue of graduates' unemployment is still been raised in several studies due to the gap of skills between the industry and educational institutions (Azmi et al., 2018; Baqutayan et al., 2019; Venesa, 2020). According to the statistic prepared by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, there were 162,000 unemployment graduates in 2018 with an increase of 4.6% from the previous year (DOSM, 2019). Hence, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the skills that graduates need to have in

order to enhance their employability within the industry (Abd Majid et al., 2020; Benbow & Hora, 2018; Fajaryati et al., 2020; Perera et al., 2017; Quinn & Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2019; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018).

One of the essential skills that graduates from various disciplines need to have is workplace readiness skills. Workplace readiness skills are considered important particularly for graduates at the Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) since the skills consist of numerous efficient and professional skills required by the industry (Peltola, 2018). Tourism is among the industry that determined graduates from the HEIs to have specific skills such as workplace readiness in order to enhance employability and to make sure they can survive the competitiveness within the industry's globalization (Fraser & Reddan, 2016; Quinn & Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2019). Tourism is also considered as an industry that requires unskilled and semi-skilled workers depending on the nature of the jobs (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). It is therefore important for the HEIs to produce tourism graduates that are ready to serve the industry not just physically fit but also mentally. Several studies believe that in order to face the era of technological disruption nowadays, the HEIs must produce graduates with high competencies and employability skills (Abelha et al., 2020; Fajaryati et al., 2020). To do so, the HEIs must also in the first place design and prepare the tourism course curriculum which integrate the skills needed by the industry particularly the workplace readiness skills.

Taking HEIs in Malaysia as example, this study was motivated by the following research questions:

1. Are workplace readiness skills important to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum?
2. Which skills in workplace readiness significantly contribute to the tourism graduates' employability?
3. In what tourism course curriculum should workplace readiness skills be integrated in order to enhance graduates' employability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employability Skills

Employability brings so many definitions according to various disciplines. Employability is considered important not just by the policy-makers but also scholars in order for the graduates to face the changes in the global competitive economy (Peeters et al. 2019). Nowadays, employability is seen as important factor which affect future students' enrolment for an academic program (Jauhari 2013). From another context, employability is seen as a set of core skills, life skills, soft skills, traditional intellectual skills, personal attributes, behavioural skills, and transferable skills (Lowden et al. 2011). In another perspective, Wakelin-Theron et al. (2018) categorize employability into two aspects namely graduates' education which consisted of traditional diplomas/degrees earned to alternative certificates, and the second aspect is corporate trainings which the graduates have completed. In simple terms, employability is seen as competencies or skills that graduates must possess to obtain and retain jobs in a highly competitive labor market. Employability is considered the biggest challenge to encourage students to be reflective learners and assess the skills they use in a variety of different work related and social encounters. Employability is seen as important aspect particularly for HEIs. Therefore, HEIs need to prepare a variety of strategies to integrate the skills into the university courses curriculum in line with the industry's expectations.

Eventually, several studies on employability have emphasized the quality of graduates that did not match the industry needs (Okolie et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2017). It was supported by previous study where a highly unemployment in competitive job market was due to the fact that the local Malaysian universities are lacking relevant soft skills competencies (Hairi et al., 2011). It is undoubtable that tourism is a labor

intensive service industry with a variety of employability skills (Rae, 2007). To cope with economic upheavals within the tourism industry, graduates must possess greater tourism employability skills in order to become successful. Among the skills that tourism graduates need to possess are workplace readiness skills, interpersonal skills, enterprise and innovation creativity skills and learning, thinking and adaptability skills (Bach & Milman, 1996; Barrows & Walsh, 2002; Chen, 1996; Fraser & Reddan, 2016; Quinn & Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2019; Tesone, 2012; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018).

Studies on Graduates' Employability and Skills

There are rapid studies on the needs and importance of tourism graduates' employability and skills within the industry. A study by Wakelin-Theron et al. (2018) on industry and graduates' perceptions regarding skills needed in the workplace within tourism industry indicated that few skills are important to be possessed by the graduates namely, ability to work under pressure, acceptance of responsibility, attention to detail, customer service/awareness, ethical conduct at work, motivation, time management skills and verbal communication. Previously, Fraser and Reddan (2016) examined the impacts of career development and work integrated on graduates' employability among the third and fourth year tourism and hotel management students at Griffith University. The study found that graduates' skills such as ability to integrate theory into practice and commencement readiness may enhance their employability within the industry. Quinn and Buzzetto-Hollywood (2019) further emphasized on the importance of skills to be possessed by tourism and hospitality graduates. They noted that graduates need to possess specific skills in order to succeed within the digitalization and globalization era in the industry. They surveyed the industry stakeholders including students and staff at the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management located at a small eastern Historically Black University.

Generally, other studies also emphasized on the skills needed for graduates' employability from various higher education disciplines. For instance, Suleman (2016) found that matching workplace requirements and graduates' employability are still uncertain matter perceived by the researchers and policy makers. Even though studies noted that several skills are important such as interpersonal skills, communication and teamwork, it was cited in the study that graduates still have to possess good information technology skills. The importance of having particular skills to enhance graduates' employability was stressed by Makki et al. (2015) by developing a framework of workplace readiness skills, career efficacy and career exploration for engineering graduates. The framework was suggested can be used as a guide for HEIs to design better program curriculum. Findings of their study were further confirmed by determining the skills needed for engineering graduates to enhance their career opportunities and gain high confidence level in the workplace (Makki et al., 2016). Currently, Fajaryati et al. (2020) surveyed literature regarding employability and graduates skills and noted that several skills are important for future graduates' employability for instance communication, team working, problem solving and technological skills. They also found that most literature suggests that these skills must be included in the instructional process of curriculum design.

Workplace Readiness Skills

The importance of workplace readiness skills for graduates' employability have been acknowledged in several studies (Bakar et al., 2013; Makki et al., 2015; Musa et al., 2011; Peltola, 2018). McClarty et al. (2017) define workplace readiness skills as individual basic academic preparation and the life skills needed to maintain employment. Workplace readiness enables graduates to contribute towards the achievement of the organization's objectives through knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding (Mason et al., 2009). In other perspective, Raftopoulos et al. (2009) define workplace readiness as skills involving graduates' confidence, skills regarding leadership, self-discipline skills, knowing how to solve problems and numeracy skills. They additionally identified workplace readiness as composition of many aspects such as workforce readiness, work-readiness skills, work place know-how, transferable skills and career skills.

Makki et al. (2015) developed a framework on work readiness skills to assist graduates in HEIs to be more confident and enhance their career development. They also suggested the framework to be used by the HEIs in preparing and designing better curriculum for graduates' employability. In a previous study, Bakar et al. (2013) surveyed 850 final year students' perceptions on work readiness skills using different approaches for instance the application of case studies, the practicality of leadership skills, implementation of project-based learning, learning through problem-based and activities involving teamwork. They also noted that these workplace readiness skills can enhance graduates' employability to meet the demand from the industry. Study by Musa et al. (2011) also emphasized on project-based learning as part of workplace readiness skills and found that these skills can facilitate and improve students through language skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, collaborative skills and leadership skills.

Tourism Education in Malaysian HEIs

In line to the growth and significance of the tourism industry to the country, Malaysia has taken serious initiative by developing more tourism programs in various levels of institutions. It is a fact that tourism education in Malaysia is developed to fill in the gaps between education and the industry needs in line with the expanding of the industry. Generally, the Malaysian HEIs comprise of two groups known as the Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA) that are funded by the Malaysian government and the Private Higher Educational Institutions (IPTS) owned by the private entities. Nowadays, there are 122 IPTA with 20 Public universities, 30 Polytechnics and 72 Community college in Malaysia, not to consider the number of IPTS that has been growing tremendously (Malaysia's Premier Education Resource Guide, 2017). As for tourism education, to date, 15 Malaysian HEIs including both IPTA and IPTS have been offering degree program in Tourism Management.

With so many institutions offering the program, the quality of the course curriculum has become a major issue for the industry. The educational institutions believe that a balance between theory and practice must be enhanced as basic component in the curriculum to enhance employability of the graduates (Mohd Shariff, 2011). In 1993, the National Occupational Skill Standard (NOSS) was developed with the purpose to lead the tourism and hospitality training institutions in designing and preparing competent graduates that can meet the actual performance of the industry. As embarked by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT) Malaysia, NOSS falls into several job areas such as the hotel industry with 33 job areas, the tourism and travel sector that consisted of 30 job areas, the theme park sector with eight job areas and six job areas in the recreational scuba diving.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a quantitative method where data and related information were gathered through the distribution of questionnaire survey. Quantitative approach is suitable to be used when the study involves discovering new information and more importantly the approach uses standards tests of validity and reliability of statistical procedures. The study will apply a cross-sectional survey which involves the data collection at one point time in order to fulfill the objectives. Quantitative method is also suitable to be applied in the study since it involved questionnaire survey to a large number of respondents.

Sample of the Study

200 tourism sectors were randomly selected using a list of tourism and hospitality organizations obtained from the Centre of University-Industry Collaboration (CUIC), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Due to

limited number of tourism sectors selected as respondents, the tourism and hospitality sectors were only selected in the Northern area, which involved Penang and Langkawi. These two destinations were chosen since both are well known as tourist spots and consist of well-established tourism and hospitality sectors such as hotels, travel agents, transportation sectors and restaurants. Therefore, tourism sectors from both destinations may provide significant inputs for the study.

Instrument of the Study

Questionnaire was used as the main instrument for the study Six domains of workplace readiness skills were adopted and adapted from previous literature and were included in the questionnaire (Bakar et al., 2013; Makki et al., 2015; Musa et al., 2011; Peltola, 2018). The six domains were named as (1) basic skills, comprised of first-hands skill and introductory skills, (2) practicality skills, involved of specific skills which require hands-on experiences, (3) planning and organizing skills, related to know-how-to plan and design comprehensive and effective aspects pertaining to managing people in organization, (4) using technology skills, comprised of skills in current technology such as computer application, computer software, mobile application and more, (5) business orientation skills, consisted of several skills which may assist graduates in running organization and business, and finally (6) self-management skills, related to graduates attitudes and motivational aspects in performing and completing their tasks. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of the skills using Likert scale ranged from 1= least important to 5 = most important.

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the questionnaire was email to the respondents in January 2020. They were given two weeks to answer and return the questionnaire also through email. However, only 100 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires. Data gained from the survey were then analyzed using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 19.0 created by SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean and median were used in order to answer the objectives of the study.

RESULTS

Background of Respondents

Table 1 depicts the findings on the background of respondents. It can be seen from the table that 48% respondents are human resource managers, followed by 31% managers and the remaining 21% are owners of the organizations. As for the age category, the findings indicated that 40% respondents are between 46 - 55 years old. It was also noted that 34% of them are above 56 years old, then followed by 21% in the category of age between 36 – 45 years old whilst the remaining 5% are between 25 – 35 years old. Interestingly, 71% are male compared to only 29% female. Further, the findings of the survey highlighted 65% respondents are graduated and only 8% are qualified as tourism professional. 42% consisted of respondents from the travel agency sector, followed by 28% from the accommodation sector and 25% are from the food and beverages sector.

The findings of the study also noted that 39% respondents have been working for more than 7 years, 48% have been working between 4 -6 years while the remaining have been working between 1 -3 years. The findings however noted only 4% are from the transportation sector. 83% of the organizations have between 10 – 50 employees and only 17% have more than 50 employees. The findings further indicated that 62% have less than 10 employees with tourism background while the remaining 38% have between 10 -50 employees with tourism background. Finally, the findings of the survey indicated 52% respondents agreed on the importance of the skills to the industry and the remaining 48% however disagreed that the skills are important for graduates' employability.

Table 1. Respondents' Background (N=100)

Profile	Percent (%)
Position in the organization:	
<i>Owner</i>	21
<i>Manager</i>	31
<i>Human resource manager</i>	48
Age:	
<i>25-35</i>	5
<i>36-45</i>	21
<i>46-55</i>	40
<i>56 above</i>	34
Gender:	
<i>Male</i>	71
<i>Female</i>	29
Qualification:	
<i>School level</i>	27
<i>Graduate</i>	65
<i>Professional</i>	8
Types of organization:	
<i>Travel agency</i>	42
<i>Accommodation</i>	28
<i>Food & beverages</i>	25
<i>Transportation</i>	4
Number of years working:	
<i>1-3 year</i>	13
<i>4-6 years</i>	48
<i>More than 7 years</i>	39
Number of employees:	
<i>10-50</i>	83
<i>More than 50</i>	17
Number of employees with tourism background/qualification:	
<i>Less than 10</i>	62
<i>10-50</i>	38
The essential for educational institution to provide skills required by the industry:	
<i>Yes</i>	52
<i>No</i>	48

The Importance of Workplace Readiness Skills in Tourism Educational Curriculum

Table 2 depicts the findings regarding the importance of workplace readiness skills to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability. The six domains earlier were presented. It can be seen from the findings that 51% respondents perceived practicality skill as the most important skill to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability (M = 4.51) whilst 38% respondents considered self-management skill as the least important skill to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability (M = 4.38). This was then followed by 47% respondents agreed that basic skill and planning and organizing skill as important skills that need to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum that the graduates must have in order to work in the industry. 45% respondents acknowledged using technology skill and 42% respondents noted business

orientation skill as somehow most important skills required by the industry to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability.

Table 2. The Importance of Workplace Readiness Skills to be integrated into the Tourism Educational Curriculum

Workplace readiness skills	Important (%)	Most important (%)	Mean
Practicality skill	49	51	4.51
Basic skill	53	47	4.47
Planning & organizing skill	53	47	4.47
Using technology skill	55	45	4.45
Business orientation skill	58	42	4.42
Self-management skill	62	38	4.38

Integration of Workplace Readiness Skills into Tourism Educational Curriculum

The study had also asked the respondents to identify in which courses in the tourism educational curriculum workplace readiness skills should be integrated (see Figure 1). 15 tourism courses were listed to the respondents and they were taken from most tourism program offered by the HEIs in Malaysia. However, the findings found that only nine tourism courses were cited by the respondents namely Introduction to Tourism, Sociology of Tourism, Tourist Behaviour, Tourism and Environmental Management, Travel and Tour Management, Geography of Tourism, Entrepreneurial Development, Human Resource Management and Tourism Seminar. Since practicality skills derived as the most important skill to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability, it was noted that 79% respondents agreed it should be in the Tourism Seminar course. On the other hands, 73% respondents found that it should be in course namely the Sociology of Tourism and 60% wanted practicality skill to be integrated in the Tourist Behaviour course.

As for basic skills, it was noted that 73% respondents agreed it need to be integrated into the Introduction to Tourism course whilst only 14% respondents agreed that using technology skills need to be integrated into the Tourism and Environmental Management course. Further, it was found that 77% respondents wanted that business orientation skills to be integrated into the course namely the Entrepreneurial Development and 66% respondents suggested business orientation skills to be integrated into the Travel and Tour Management course. Additionally, it was highlighted in the study that 69% respondents wanted planning and organizing skills to be integrated into the Human Resource Management course and 64% respondents wanted it to be integrated into the Geography of Tourism course. Finally, the study found that only 24% respondents suggested that self-management skills to be integrated into one specific course that is the Tourist Behaviour.

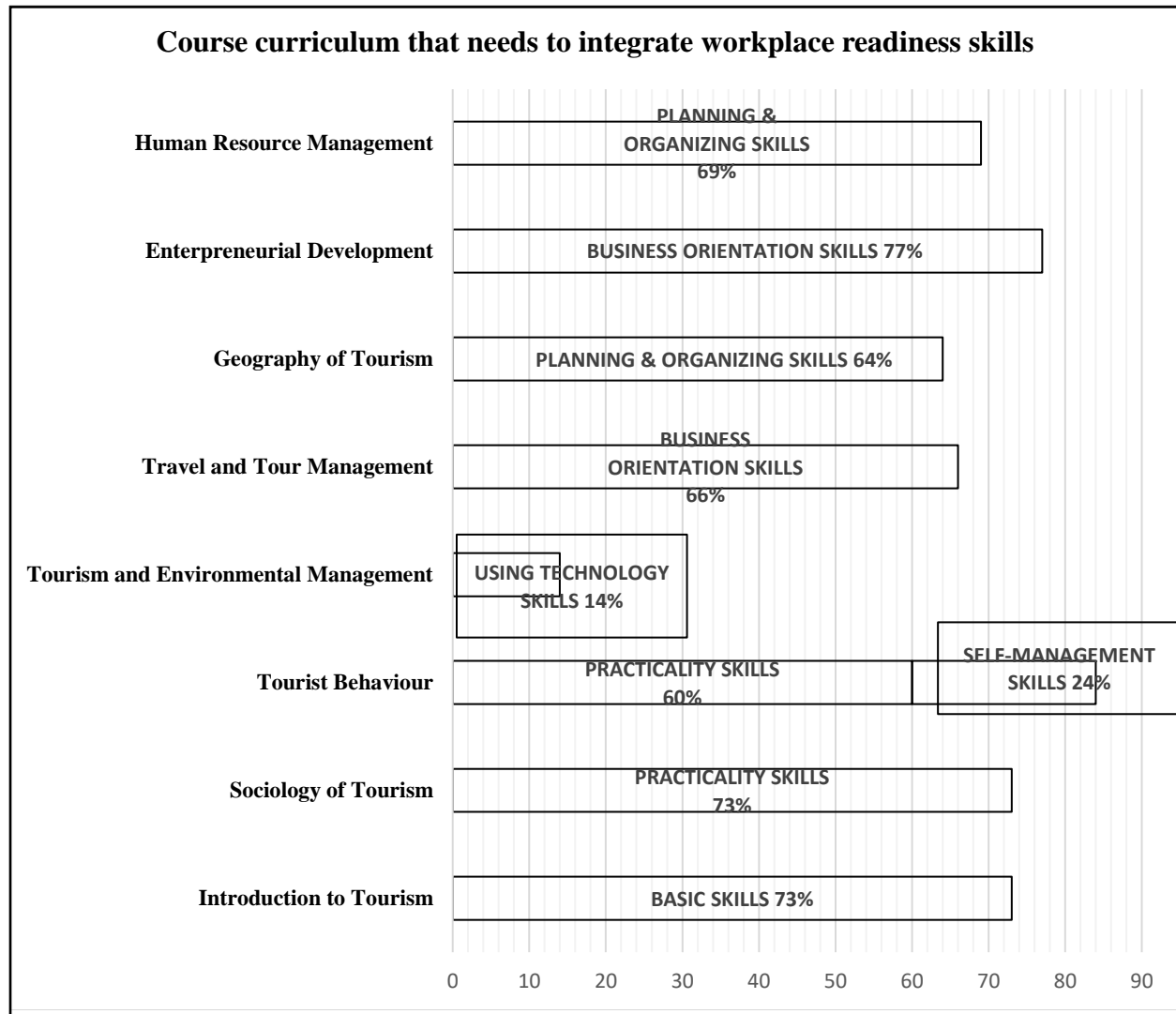


Figure 1. Integration of Workplace Readiness Skills into the Tourism Educational Curriculum

DISCUSSION

Three objectives are highlighted in the study. The first objective is to investigate the importance of workplace readiness skills to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum to enhance graduates' employability. Workplace readiness skills comprised of six domains namely the basic skills, the practicality skills, the planning and organizing skills, the business orientation skills, the using technology skills and finally the self-management skills. All the six domains in workplace readiness skills are perceived by the respondents as important skills that important to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum to enhance graduates' employability within the workplace. The findings are in line with the previous studies where the practicality skills, the business orientation skills and the planning and organizing skills are found to be important for the successful of graduates' employability within the industry (Fraser & Reddan, 2016; Makki et al., 2016; Quinn & Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2019; Raftopoulos et al., 2009).

As for the second objective of the study, it is noted that the practicality skills derived as the most important workplace readiness skills that need to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for

graduates to have in order for them to work within the industry. The using technology skills somehow derived as the least important workplace readiness skills which required by the industry to be integrated into the curriculum. To answer objective three of the study, the respondents have been asked to identify which tourism courses need to take into account the domains of workplace readiness skills. It is noted that the using technology skills must be integrated only into the tourism course which does not quite relevant in the scenario of pandemic today.

Compared to other studies, the skill is considered important to be possessed by graduates and should be integrated into the course curriculum (Abdul Hamid et al., 2014; Abelha et al., 2020; Rahmat et al, 2012; Suleman, 2016). The skill probably should be integrated into other relevant courses for instance Travel and Tour Management and Entrepreneurial Development since graduates must be able to run few related systems during daily operation and management in the tourism sectors. However, the contrast in findings could be due to the study was conducted before the pandemic, hence it did not contribute to the suggestions made by the respondents. Further, the study also noted that respondents suggest the basic skills to be integrated into the fundamental course of the tourism curriculum. This is true in the case of introductory courses where knowledge and firsthand skills regarding tourism need to be highlighted to graduates in order to prepare them for future employment within the industry. Additionally, the basic skills need to be integrated into the fundamental course as it is a major course representing all issues regarding tourism before graduates are required to take further courses in the program (Eisner, 2010; Wilson & Sibthorp, 2018).

On the other hand, self-management skills are one of the domains in workplace readiness which received low level of agreement among the respondents. It explains the findings earlier indicating the insignificance of the skill for graduates' employability. In fact, the respondents probably find that the skills may not contribute to future employability of the graduates within the industry challenges and globalization, hence should not be integrated into the course curriculum. Even though the self-management skills are significantly related to the Sociology of Tourism course, the respondents which represent the industry itself consider the self-management skills only significant to be integrated into the Tourist Behaviour course. The study eventually listed several tourism courses for the respondents to identify which domain of workplace readiness skills need to be integrated.

However, it is noted that only a few courses are seen by the respondents as significant. The nine courses need to integrate workplace readiness skills in order to enhance graduates' employability within the tourism industry compare to other courses. These nine courses are significant probably due to the fact that most of them are designing as project-based learning courses which are relevant to workplace readiness (Musa et al., 2010). Hence, the HEIs must take into account these nine courses during the planning and designing the course curriculum and structure and make sure all the vital workplace readiness skills are to be integrated into the courses. This is very important in order to enhance tourism graduates' employability.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has achieved its objectives as stated in the earlier part of the paper. Tourism graduates need to have specific workplace readiness skills to face the challenges and globalization within the industry. The tourism industry believes that having workplace readiness skills for tourism graduates are important in order to determine their future employability within the industry. This study has confirmed the significance of having workplace readiness skills to be integrated into the tourism educational curriculum for graduates' employability particularly the practicality skills, the business orientation skills, and the planning and organizing skills. By developing a comprehensive and effective tourism educational curriculum and taking into consideration all the required workplace readiness skills required by the industry, the HEIs would

produce graduates who are professional in their field which eventually would lead to successful graduate employability within the industry.

Several implications derived from the findings of the study. Theoretically, the study contributes to a better knowledge and understanding of integrating workplace readiness skills into the course curriculum. Few major skills presenting workplace readiness derived specifically in the context of tourism course curriculum. Particular courses in tourism education must also be updated to survive the competitiveness in the industry. The three major skills of workplace readiness also represent industry expectations of tourism and hospitality graduates' employability. Hence, it provides significant input to be taken into account by the HEIs. In practical, to produce graduates that can fulfil the industry's expectations and needs, the HEIs need to integrate work readiness skills into several tourism courses. HEIs must also revise the course structure and design a better curriculum to enhance graduates' employability. At this point, a strong collaboration between HEIs and industry would lead to a better course curriculum for future graduates' employability.

There are also a few limitations of the study. It must be noted that the study was conducted within the area of Penang and Langkawi with a total number of 100 tourism and hospitality sectors as respondents. Hence, their perceptions regarding the skills required by the industry probably are specified and limited to their organizations and workplace environment. The study also investigated workplace readiness skills as the main skill for graduates' employability. There are other significant skills pertaining to graduates' employability within the industry, such as interpersonal and soft skills. It is suggested that future research should be conducted by taking into account more number of sectors from the countries which may also involve various types of tourism and hospitality sectors within the industry. Further, future study should consider examining other related skills needed for graduates' employability. For instance, a study to assess the needs of technological skill is also essential in consistent to the digitalization within the tourism industry today and should be investigated through qualitative method and an in-depth survey. Additionally, future study is also recommended being undertaken by investigating factors that may influence the workplace readiness skills needed for graduates' employability within the tourism industry, for instance age, gender and previous experience in tourism sector.

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