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### THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-TECHNICAL SKILLS FOR GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY DURING AND AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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#### ABSTRACT

Nowadays, due to the rapidly changing business environment, non-technical skills have become critical factors in determining employment. Companies assert that fresh graduates often fall short of their expectations. Nevertheless, employers emphasize that non-technical skills are crucial for fresh graduates to remain competitive and secure employment in the current job market. Therefore, this research aims to study the importance of non-technical skills and their impact on graduates' employability. The study utilizes online questionnaire surveys for 120 graduates from different states, universities, occupations, and backgrounds to rank the importance of 15 non-technical skills. Meanwhile, Pearson correlations and multiple regression analysis are employed to study the relationship between three independent variables and graduates' employability. The statistical findings reveal a positive correlation between non-technical skills and graduates' employment. According to the study results, the top five skills deemed more important than others are adaptability, ethical behavior, leadership, critical and creative thinking, and tolerance of ambiguity. Therefore, it is essential for students to develop their non-technical skills during their studies to meet the expectations of future employers.

**Keywords:** graduates' employability, non-technical skills, job market, expectations, COVID-19

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first identified in Wuhan, China, spreading rapidly worldwide (Hui et al., 2020). Consequently, social distancing became a prevalent preventive measure in countries, including Malaysia, leading to mobility restrictions and lockdown orders. This measure has not only impacted the economic activities of existing companies and workers but has also significantly affected interns undergoing practicum (Gill, 2020). With a majority of the workforce required to work from home, not all business activities can be conducted remotely. Consequently, the lockdown resulted in a 200-thousand-person increase in job losses, reaching a new high of 718.1 thousand unemployed individuals in Malaysia in 2020 (DOSM, 2021). This situation has affected young employees, particularly recent graduate students who have just completed their practical training. The competition for employment among graduates has intensified due to the rise in unemployment caused by the epidemic. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the number of graduates in Malaysia increased by 4.4 percent, from 5.13 million in 2019 to 5.36 million in 2020, and continued to rise by 4.7% to reach 5.61 million in 2021 (DOSM, 2022). Meanwhile, Table 1 presents graduate statistics from 2019 to 2021. In 2021, there were 4.57 million employed graduate students, up from 4.12 million in 2019, representing an increase of 10.9%. On the other hand, 197.4 thousand graduates were unemployed, resulting in a graduate unemployment rate of 4.1 percent. Specifically, during the health crisis in 2021, the issue of skill-related underemployment among graduates worsened, with 33.9% (1.55 million persons) employed in semi-skilled and low-skilled occupations. This reflects an increase from 31.2% (1.36 million persons) in 2020.

**Table 1:**

Graduates' Statistics in Malaysia, 2019–2021.

Description	Year		2019		2020		2021	
				%		%		%
Number of Graduates (million)			5.13		5.36		5.61	
Employed Graduates ('000)			4,120.8	96.1	4353.1	95.6	4569.1	95.9
Unemployed Graduates ('000)			165.2	3.9	202.4	4.4	197.4	4.1

Source: DOSM (2021) and DOSM (2022).

Given the highly competitive job market during and after the lockdown, characterized by a significant drop in demand for the workforce, employers are now more inclined to hire individuals possessing not only excellent academic qualifications but also a skill set that meets the needs of job seekers. Employers, in contrast, argue that graduates often lack the essential non-technical abilities required for success in the workplace (Shola et al., 2019; Asabeh et al., 2023). It is appropriate for businesses to seek well-rounded employees rather than standard graduates with solely technical knowledge. The absence of non-technical abilities that fall short of employers' expectations is a major reason why approximately half of final year students who have completed their practical programs are not hired by their previous employers (Buheji & Buheji, 2020; Moss-Pech, 2021). Therefore, employability competency, especially the non-technical skills required for the post-COVID-19 era, the so-called 'new normal,' becomes a key element enabling graduates to stay competitive and retain their positions in the labor market.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Graduate Employability*

According to Fakunle & Higson (2021), employability is predominantly perceived as a measurable economic outcome for graduates and higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIs play a crucial role in training and producing graduates with the knowledge and abilities required by industries, with graduates becoming key contributors to economic development (Fakunle & Higson, 2021).

Graduate employability is often characterized as a combination of achievements encompassing various knowledge domains, personal attributes, and skills that enhance graduates' employability and ensure job security in their chosen professions (Nusrat and Sultana, 2019; Behle, 2020). Tomlinson (2012) asserts that it is crucial to recognize that graduate employability isn't solely about securing a job; it also pertains to an individual's capacity to consistently develop and grow in their chosen sector. Previous studies have commonly categorized graduate employability into technical and non-technical skills (Weber et al., 2009; Andrews & Higson, 2010; Rebele & St. Pierre, 2019; de Schepper et al., 2020; Mainga et al., 2022; Perez-Encinas & Berbegal-Mirabent, 2023). Technical skills relate to a person's knowledge of theoretical applications, while non-technical skills emphasize the individual's attributes and competencies (Griffiths et al., 2017; de Schepper et al., 2020). Employers often require graduates to possess technical expertise in their fields and the ability to navigate diverse work environments using non-technical skills (Jackson, 2017).

### 2.2 *Non-Technical Skills*

In a rapidly evolving world, businesses must adapt to changes to remain competitive in their field. According to Ngoo et al. (2015), employers prefer autonomous and leader-like graduates over followers. Graduates possessing non-technical skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, moral ethics, leadership, teamwork, self-motivation, lifelong learning, and information management skills are highly sought after in the job market (Ong, 2013; Yusof & Jamaluddin, 2015).

Certainly, broad-based or "generic" skills like creative and innovative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, and communication are fundamental (Tuka, 2022). These skills enhance the likelihood of successfully learning new applications needed by businesses (Wye & Lim, 2009). Lee (2000) and Brouwer & Jansen (2017) argue that the value of the 'graduate attribute' surpasses that of the degree subjects studied. Many businesses value graduates' ability to handle complex information and effectively communicate it, deeming it more significant than the specific degree topic studied (Rebele & St. Pierre, 2019; Singh Dubey et al., 2022).

Critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making require a connection between theory and practice, an understanding of the corporate environment, and the ability to apply these skills in real-world situations (Ismail, 2011; Calma & Cotronei-Baird, 2021). The demand for non-technical skills has surged, especially in the era of globalization and rapid technological change, as evidenced by Busse's (2011) study, which highlighted their importance in enhancing employee job performance. Ismail (2011), Jackson and Chapman (2012), Abu Asabeh et al. (2023), Abdi and Kenea (2023) studies emphasize that graduates need non-technical skills such as data analysis and interpretation, critical thinking, teamwork, toleration, communication skills, personal attitudes, leadership, self-management, and technological skills. Thus, non-technical skills are crucial for augmenting technical skills, enabling graduates to complete assigned work more efficiently (Calma & Cotronei-Baird, 2021).

### 2.2.1 Analytical and Design Skills

Analytical skills are defined as the ability to collect and analyze information and make informed decisions (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2021). On the other hand, a wide range of competencies are included in design skills, including creativity, critical thinking, attention to detail, and the capacity for both verbal and visual concept communication (Dam & Teo, 2021). Hence, design skills always worked together with analytical skills. This is because individuals will need to identify and analyse the problems (analytical skills), followed by solving the problems with critical and creative thinking (design skills). Ismail's (2011) found that employees with problem solving skills are more likely to get promotions and feel secure in their employment.

Graduates with problem-solving skills have a positive impact on their employability, according to Ng et al. (2021). The study further asserts that such graduates are more likely to achieve success in management compared to those lacking problem-solving skills. This is because they can identify future possibilities and impacts when addressing challenges. Nadarajah (2021), Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) categorizes analytical and design skills as crucial employability skills for graduates, ranking them among the top five according to employers. The increasing trend involves assigning workers authority to oversee entire projects or specific components, demanding the application of analytical and design skills for successful task completion. Nusrat and Sultana (2019), in addition, found that 80% of respondents (employers) addressed problem-solving skill as a vital soft skill for business graduates in Bangladesh. These findings are also supported by Shafie et al. (2014), Baird and Parayitam (2019), McGunagle and Zizka (2021), whereby they highly recommend that fresh graduates must possess analytical and design skills to enhance their employability competency. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Analytic and design skills are positively correlated to graduates' employability in Malaysia.

### 2.2.2 Appreciative Skills

Appreciative skills refer to the effectiveness and efficiency of gathering and assessing accurate data and information for decision-making. Individuals may have a better understanding of their present condition by doing a complete analysis as well as discovering patterns and requirements in their company and community (Nusrat and Sultana, 2019). In Chai (2017), Nusrat and Sultana (2019), and McGunagle and Zizka (2021), they found that appreciative skills have a significant impact on graduates' employability. Ghasemaghaei et al. (2018) claimed that technological competency is also a key factor in improving task performance effectiveness. Analyzing data can be done through searching sources on the internet, which is a fast and efficient method of information collection. According to Chai (2017), most employers have high expectations for graduates' appreciative skills, with about 83.3% of them considering the level of appreciative skills as one of the important factors in offering job opportunities. Davis (2017) describes two types of data, primary and secondary, collected for the purpose of gaining valuable information in decision-making. He also indicates that most companies prefer to recruit graduates who can access data information to make decisions based on challenges. This proposed the following hypothesis:

H<sub>2</sub>: Appreciative skills are positively correlated to graduates' employability in Malaysia.

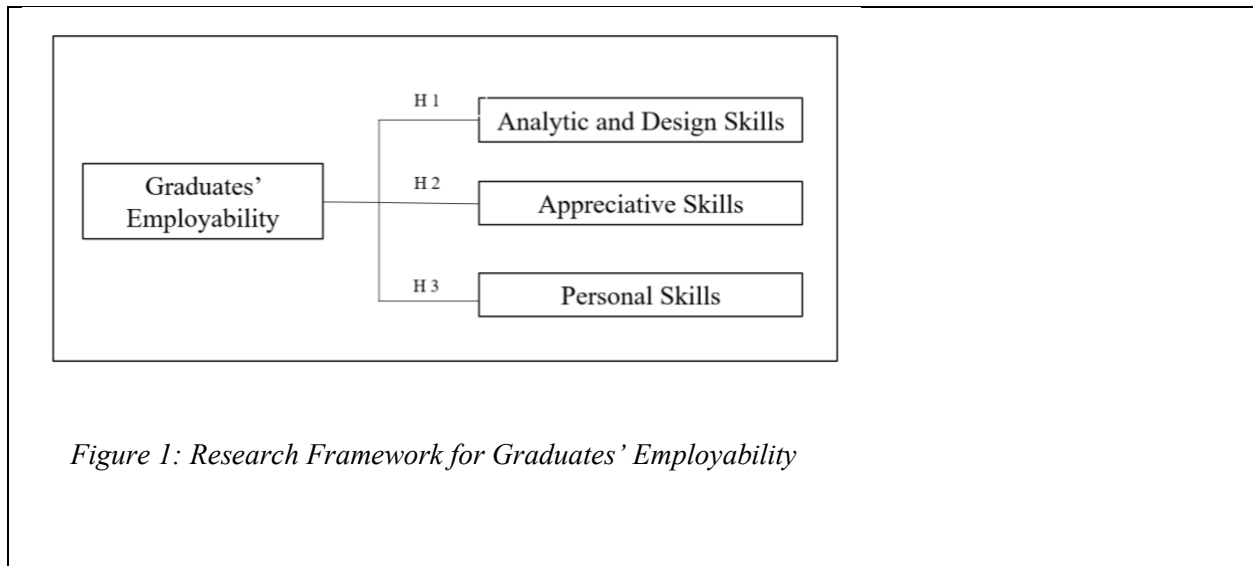
### 2.2.3 Personal Skills

Personal skills, defined as the soft abilities facilitating positive interactions in both the workplace and daily life (Nair & Fahimirad, 2019), encompass an individual's intrinsic qualities, deemed invaluable and not

easily taught. Teng et al. (2019) further categorize these as behavioral competencies, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. Hossain et al. (2020) affirm the significance of soft skills for business graduates in securing employment, reinforcing the assertion by Gurcharan Singh and Garib Singh (2008) that technical knowledge alone is insufficient for employability – personal skills are imperative for job opportunities. Garib (2008) recommends the cultivation of leadership skills, especially in collaborative projects, aligning with Ong (2013) and Chai (2017), who assert that personal skills positively impact graduates' employability. They emphasize that while technical expertise is crucial for job performance, non-technical skills, such as personal skills, play a vital role in teamwork and relationship-building with superiors, peers, and clients. Hossain et al. (2020) underscore the importance of critical thinking skills for effective problem-solving, noting that technical knowledge alone is insufficient without the ability to think critically and creatively. Studies by Akdere and Egan (2020) and Haim Faridian (2022) concluded that leadership skills are pivotal in achieving organizational goals by leveraging available resources and motivating team members for optimal performance through coordination and persuasion. They assert that a successful leader takes responsibility for group work, a sentiment echoed by Chai (2017). The value of soft skills, emphasized by employers, underscores the impact of globalization and the knowledge economy, highlighting the need for graduates to communicate effectively, be self-effective, committed, build relationships in teams, and adapt to external contexts (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Thus, this proposes the following hypothesis:

H<sub>3</sub>: Personal skills are positively correlated to the graduates' employability in Malaysia.

Figure 1 shows the research framework developed for this study.



### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

#### *Sample and Data Collection*

The target population for this study is approximately 710,000 graduates who are at least diploma holders in Malaysia. The sample size of 120 graduates is deemed representative and adequate for the total graduated population at a 95% confidence level. Hair Jr. et al. (2010) suggest that since just three independent variables are being studied, a total of 120 samples is considered enough to represent the population. An online questionnaire through Google Forms, a survey administration software, is adopted to distribute the

questionnaire to the target respondents. This is because social distancing is being practised by the researcher and society. Therefore, online distribution of the questionnaire will be more convenient. Besides, selecting online questionnaires as a data collection method allows the researcher to collect a wide range of information from the respondents from different educational backgrounds, job sectors, and workplace locations. This would ensure the collected data is able to provide the most accurate results as the respondents are being chosen randomly.

Non-probability sampling method has been applied in this study by using convenient sampling. Convenient sampling is a non-random sample in which the subject is chosen based on non-systematic procedures, availability, and ease of access (Pace, 2021). The researcher chose convenient sampling for this study since the data information could be acquired simply, quickly, and conveniently. The acquired data will be analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26.0 to perform different statistical tests. The aims of data analysis are to determine central tendency and variability, as well as to test reliability and the research hypothesis (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019). It is critical to avoid errors that might discredit the study findings.

**Table 2:**

The list of items for dependent and independent variables

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>Items</b>
Graduates' Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduates' employability requires analytical skills.</li> <li>• Graduates' employability requires design skills.</li> <li>• Graduates' employability requires appreciative skills.</li> <li>• Graduates' employability requires personal skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Independent Variables</b>	
Analytical and Design Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify, evaluate, organise and manage information and evidence</li> <li>• Research skills</li> <li>• Analyse reason and logic, conceptualise</li> <li>• Solve problems</li> <li>• Ethical reasoning</li> </ul>
Appreciative Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate and react to new ideas</li> <li>• Make judgments</li> <li>• Think and act critically</li> <li>• Recognise one own strengths and limitation</li> <li>• Appreciate professional behaviour</li> </ul>
Personal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethical behaviour</li> <li>• Thinking and act independently</li> <li>• Toleration of ambiguity</li> <li>• Creative thinking</li> <li>• Adaptability</li> </ul>

Source: Ong (2013).

### *Questionnaire Design and Measurement Scale*

The questionnaire for this research retained the non-technical skills that were applied in Ong's (2013) study. Therefore, the items of non-technical skills adopted by Ong (2013) were selected in this research due to the positive results that proved non-technical skills were affecting graduates' employability in Malaysia. There

are three independent variables of non-technical skills that affect the graduates' employability, which are: analytical and design skills; appreciative skills; and personal skills. According to Zikmund (2003), measurement refers to the systematic assigning of numbers to objects or events. The four levels of measurement scales are nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio. The questionnaire for this research consists of two sections, which are Section A and Section B. The demographic profile of the respondents in Section A is measured using interval scales, ratio scales and nominal scales' measures. Gender, ethnicity, educational institution, education level, course of study, employment status, job sector, workplace location, and non-technical skills or involvement during studies and after graduating are measured on nominal scales. Meanwhile, for age and average monthly income, an interval scale is used with a "rank" that involves numerical values and is measured by a standardised unit. judgments from respondents. In Section B, the independent variables are measured using interval scale measurement. The list of items for each variable in this research is presented in Table 2. All the independent variables are measured on a 5-point scale that ranges from (1) "Not important" to (5) "Very important". For all three independent variables and dependent variables, respondents have the option of selecting their pre-determined responses. To ensure that the questionnaire is understood easily by the respondents in terms of the use of language, grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary, the researcher has conducted a pilot test by distributing the questionnaires to lecturers and friends.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Demographic Profile*

The respondents' demographic profile is presented in Table 3. There were 65 (54.2%) males and 55 (45.8%) females who participated in the survey. The majority of respondents (50.8%) are Chinese, followed by Malay (26.7%) and Indian (22.5%). Also, the age group with the majority (65.8%) belongs to the age group of 24 to 29, followed by the age group of 18 to 23 (29.2%) and the age group of 30 to 34 (5%). Next, 40.8% of respondents graduated from local public universities, followed by graduates from local private universities and colleges (39.2%), polytechnics (11.7%), and foreign universities (8.3%). Out of 120 respondents, 65.8% of respondents have an educational level of degree, followed by diploma (24.2%), master (7.5%), and PhD (2.5%). For course of study, 60% of respondents graduated from business courses, while non-business course graduates represent the minority (40%). The employment status shows the majority of respondents are private sector employees (62.5%), followed by public sector employees (17.5%), self-employed (17.5%), and unemployed (2.5%).

The majority of the respondents (17.5%) work in the wholesale and retail sector and other sectors, followed by manufacturing (14.2%), electronic (12.5%), food and beverages (11.7%), education (10%), banking and finance (10%), medical and healthcare (6.7%), and unemployment (2.5%). The majority of respondents (34.2%) work in central Malaysia, Northern Malaysia (25%), East Malaysia (11.7%), Overseas (12.5%), East Coast Malaysia (7.5%), and Southern Malaysia (6.7%), with 2.5% unemployed. The majority (45%) of the respondents' average income per month fell between RM2,500 and RM4,844, followed by RM2,499 and below (10.8%), RM10,960 and above (10.8%), and the lowest 10% was the range of RM7,110 – RM10,959. About 35% of the respondents were involved and active in non-technical skills-related activities or programmes during studies, followed by involved but not active respondents (33.3%), and 31.7% of the respondents were not involved in any non-technical skills-related activities during studies. Last in demographic data, 47.5% of respondents do not get involved in any technical skills-related activities or programmes after graduating, followed by respondents who were involved but not active (30%), and respondents who were involved and active (22.5%).

**Table 3:***Demographic Background of Respondents (N = 120)*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	65	54.2
Female	55	45.8
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Malay	32	26.7
Chinese	61	50.8
Indian	27	22.5
<b>Age</b>		
18 - 23	35	29.2
24 – 29	79	65.8
30 - 34	6	5.0
<b>Educational Institution</b>		
Local public university	49	40.8
Local private university & College	47	39.2
Polytechnic	14	11.7
Foreign University	10	8.3
<b>Education Level</b>		
Diploma	29	24.2
Degree	79	65.8
Master	9	7.5
PhD	3	2.5
<b>Course of Study</b>		
Business	72	60.0
Non-business	48	40.0
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Private sector employee	75	62.5
Public sector employee	21	17.5
Self-employed	21	17.5
Unemployed	3	2.5
<b>Job Sector</b>		
Banking & finance	12	10.0
Education	12	10.0
Electronic	15	12.5
Food & Beverages	14	11.7
Manufacture	17	14.2
Medical & healthcare	8	6.7
Wholesale & retail	21	17.5
Unemployed	3	2.5
<b>Workplace Location</b>		
Central Malaysia	41	34.2
East Coast Malaysia	9	7.5



	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
East Malaysia	14	11.7
Northern Malaysia	20	25.0
Southern Malaysia	8	6.7
Overseas	15	12.5
Unemployed	3	2.5
<b>Average Income/Month</b>		
RM2,499 and below	13	10.8
RM2,500 – RM4,849	54	45.0
RM4,850 – RM7,009	28	23.3
RM7,110 – RM10,959	12	10
RM10,960 and above	13	10.8
<b>Non-Technical Skills Related Activities/ Programmes during Studies</b>		
Yes, and active	42	35.0
Yes, but not active	40	33.3
No	38	31.7
<b>Non-Technical Skills Related Activities/ Programmes after Graduating</b>		
Yes, and active	27	22.5
Yes, but not active	36	30.0
No	57	47.5

### *Validity Analysis*

According to Table 4, the value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) for this research is 0.84, which is greater than 0.8 and proves the sufficiency of data. Meanwhile, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, with a value of 561.927, is attained by reaching the significant value of 0.00 ( $p < 0.05$ ), thus it is significant.

### **Table 4:**

#### *Summary of KMO and Bartlett's Test*

KMO Test	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Approx. Chi-Square)	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Significance)
0.840	561.927	0.000

### *Reliability Analysis*

Cronbach's coefficient was tested in this research as reported in Table 5. According to George and Mallery (2020), Cronbach's Alpha for all variables that exceed the minimum value of 0.700 are considered reliable, hence the results of this research are reliable and none of the items are abandoned.

**Table 5:***Summary of Reliability Analysis*

Variables	Cronbach Alpha Value	No. of Items
Analytical and Design Skills (IV1)	0.839	5
Appreciative Skills (IV2)	0.849	5
Personal Skills (IV3)	0.850	5
Graduates' Employability (DV)	0.894	4

*Pearson Correlation Analysis*

Table 6 shows that all the independent variables have a positive association with the dependent variable. Personal skills have the strongest relationship with graduates' employability ( $r = 0.874$ ), followed by analytical and design skills (0.855), and appreciative skills (0.864). All hypotheses in this study are accepted because the p-values are less than 0.05 ( $0 < 0.05$ ) (Nunan et al., 2020).

**Table 6:***Summary of Pearson Correlation*

			Graduates' Employability (DV)
Analytical and Design Skills	Pearson	Correlation	0.855** (0.000)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		
Appreciative Skills	Pearson	Correlation	0.854** (0.000)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		
Personal Skills	Pearson	Correlation	0.874** (0.000)
	Sig. (1-tailed)		

*Multiple Regression Analysis*

Table 7 shows that the R<sup>2</sup> for this model is 0.829, which indicates that 82.90% of the variation in the dependent variable (graduates' employability) can be explained by analytical and design skill, appreciative skills, and personal skills (independent variables). The value of the Durbin-Watson test for this study shows that there is negative autocorrelation for the variables as the value is greater than 2 (Coakes, 2020).

**Table 7:***Model Summary*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	0.910	0.829	0.824	0.1868	2.288

*Regression Coefficients*

Table 8 shows that the analytical and design skills ( $\beta = 0.396$ ) have the greatest impact on graduates' employability. It means that for every additional unit increase in analytical and design skills, there will be an increase of 0.396 units in graduates' employability, while other variables remain unchanged. Following that, personal skills (0.331) have second largest influence on graduates' employability, followed by appreciative skills (0.235).

**Table 8:***Summary of Regression Coefficients*

Model		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		Beta		
1	(Constant)		-2.196	0.030
	Analytical and Design Skills (IV1)	0.396	5.767	0.000
	Appreciative Skills (IV2)	0.235	2.359	0.020
	Personal Skills	0.331	3.081	0.003

All the hypotheses are accepted for this study since the value of Standard Coefficient Beta ( $\beta$ ) for all three independent variables is greater than 0. Therefore, the results shows that analytical and design skills, appreciative skills, and personal skills are positively related to the graduates' employability in Malaysia. The positive impacts of analytical and design skills, appreciative skills, and personal skills on graduates' employability are statistically significant at 1 percent, 5 percent, and 1 percent, respectively.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the results, there is sufficient evidence to prove the significant relationship between three independent variables (analytical and design skills; appreciative skills; and personal skills) and the dependent variable (graduates' employability) ( $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that graduates that master these non-technical skills are more likely to get employment and succeed in their career. The results of the study are found to be similar to the research of Ismail (2011) and Ong (2013) that proved analytical and design skills have a huge impact on the graduates' employability. The ability to identify, evaluate, organize, and manage information and evidence; analyse reason and logic; conceptualise; solve problems; research; and ethical reasoning are essential for graduates when it comes to employment. Employers are looking into these skills sets when hiring fresh graduates, since employees with excellent analytical and design skills can solve problems for organisations. Therefore, it is necessary for students to master these skills while they are still studying at university to prepare for a future career.

Meanwhile, studies by Nusrat and Sultana (2019) and McGunagle and Zizka (2021) also supported that appreciativeness has a significant relationship with the graduates' employability, which is consistent with the current study's findings. Therefore, we can conclude that the ability to evaluate and react to new ideas, make judgments, think and act critically, recognise one's own strengths and imitate others, and appreciate professional behaviour are the key components of appreciative skills that allow graduates to increase their chances of being employed. Moreover, the generated results also show that personal skills and graduates'

employability are positively related ( $p < 0.05$ ) and this is corroborated with the results from past studies (Hossain et al., 2020; Haim Faridian, 2022). From here, we can draw a conclusion about the importance of personal skills, which include ethical behaviour, leadership, toleration of ambiguity, critical and creative thinking, and adaptability. These skills are positively related to the graduates' employability, and they are the key factors in determining the employment of graduates. Thus, it is necessary for students to build their personal skills during their studies by getting involved in non-technical skill-related activities and programmes.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study show how each non-technical skill might impact the graduates' employability in Malaysia during and post COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the increase in the number of graduates from both local public and private HEIs, this topic has recently caught the attention of many Malaysian researchers. However, there is still a lack of study regarding this issue in the context of a pandemic. Therefore, the researchers believe that the outcomes of the current study could provide various implications and suggestions for students, HEIs, and organisations as a means of improving the educational system and ensuring the employment of high-quality graduates. Industrial training, like an internship or practicum, is a critical initial step for fresh graduates. It provides them with experience, particularly in the working environment related to their profession, which is limited at educational institutions. Non-technical skills, on the other hand, just like all other capabilities, must be developed, practised, and fostered. Occasionally, a student is unprepared for what industries demand of them. As a result, a three-to-six-month stay in the workforce is quite beneficial. Final year students that are deployed with different firms can pick up non-technical skills and become more equipped for their future careers. This will assist them in identifying competencies that they lack, as well as provide adequate time for them to develop and polish them.

There is a need for a more hands-on educational system. Currently, a student is given a false concept of what education is all about from the time he or she enters primary school until they graduate from university. Schools rush to give students solutions to questions they haven't asked and generalisations about experiences they haven't experienced. In its present form, the apparent objective of education, which is to make the individual and society "better" in some qualitative sense, seems to be lacking. Along the way, we have begun to place a greater emphasis on quality. We do not think it is crucial to question why we need education in our drive to have everyone educated. Therefore, a student expects to be spoon-fed in a variety of situations. Their primary goal must be to pass a test. To accomplish this, students are often required to memorise theories and methods that they do not fully comprehend. It will not be sufficient to just change the way a few courses are taught. In fact, Malaysia's education system should be overhauled.

Education with the essential technical and non-technical skills that are required by the sectors depending on their field of study is another possible solution to this problem of non-technical skills gaps among graduates. If this is implemented correctly, the HEIs will be able to refocus their teaching and enable a more focused and well-developed course framework that will give the graduates more comprehensive non-technical abilities. When this approach is used, the HEIs will have a new main objective: educating and helping students develop a variety of non-technical skills. Universities could also establish courses for professional organisations to teach students vital non-technical skills and real-world technical knowledge. If teachers first educate and then instruct using practical knowledge rather than abstract ideas, students will learn more quickly and effectively. As a result of the partnership between HEIs and organisations, graduates may have a better probability of possessing both technical and non-technical skills. Thus, fresh graduates are more prepared to satisfy the demands of employers at work and have greater potential.

Although it is easy to point the finger at the government, students should also be responsible for their future careers. It should be them who take the initiative and are intrinsically inspired to bring about change. They should participate in all aspects of their education and have the initiative and drive to get involved in activities and programmes that are connected to non-technical skills. When students are self-motivated and independent, they will discover a way to develop a variety of non-technical skills on their own. Students should concentrate on and develop non-technical skills, including leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, research skills, tolerance, and the appropriate attitude to step beyond their comfort zones.

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