

READINESS FOR CORE COMPETENCIES OF HALAL EXECUTIVE AMONG HALAL UNDERGRADUATES IN UiTM SHAH ALAM

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Abstract: *Halal executives play an essential role in a Halal-certified company. Core competencies are generally associated with work productivity, performance and organizational performance. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare future halal executives, evaluate halal executives' practices in the workplace, and for their lifelong professional development. Halal-related program studies offered in Malaysia still need to implement work-based learning approaches. Thus, the work readiness of Halal graduates is yet to be defined. In addition to that, Malaysian graduates are regarded as lacking in employability attributes. The present studies' purpose is to analyze halal graduates' readiness for the core competency domain of Halal Executive and to investigate the importance of readiness to work for the core competency domain of Halal Executive based on Halal undergraduate perspective. Simple random sampling was utilized in this study. This research uses quantitative approaches and the Krejcie Morgan method for sampling $N130 = 104$ respondents. A total of 104 questionnaires were distributed through Google Forms. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the impact of the level of readiness and importance for the core competency domain of Halal Executive among Halal Management undergraduate students. The results show that the level of readiness is moderate with a mean value of 3.979. The current program core syllabus appears to influence the readiness level in providing the knowledge on core competencies of Halal Executives. This study can benefit the student to face the world of work in the future, especially in the field related to halal.*

Keywords: *Competencies; Halal Industry; Halal Executive; Readiness*

Introduction

Graduate work-readiness is gaining importance as a selection criterion for predicting graduate potential and a predictor for graduates' potential job performance and career advancement in the workplace (Winterton & Turner, 2019). Long-term viability and human resource development are critical components of the halal industry's success. Although no one has declared that the halal industry needs human capital to succeed, it is necessary. A country is particularly vulnerable due to a scarcity of human capital assets in the halal business. Developing world-class halal industry human capital assets is arduous even for Malaysia. In addition, Malaysia and the rest of the globe are concerned about the high graduate unemployment rate. This is especially relevant given the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 (RAIT, 2021). In positioning Malaysia as a global halal hub and the development of the halal industry, the Malaysian government has established three comprehensive master plans (11th Malaysia Plan 2016 – 2020, Third Industrial Master Plan (IMP3) 2006 – 2020, and Halal Industry Master Plan 2030 (HIMP 2030). The three master plans aim to strengthen the halal ecosystem, promote socio-economic progress, and help Malaysia achieve its objective of being a global hub for halal production, trade, and service. According to the IMP3 2006 – 2020, industry participants must employ highly trained and knowledgeable human capital. Human competency and capability development are critical success factors for long-term market viability. Malaysia prioritises talent development as one of the main enablers of HIMP 2030 to strengthen human capital development (Suhaimie et al., 2019). The sustainability of human competency in the Halal industry highly depends on the graduate work-readiness of the core competencies index specifically for Halal Management graduates (Nik et al., 2022).

In keeping with Malaysia's development as a worldwide halal hub, halal education is outstanding in Malaysia. Furthermore, various organizations, such as religious departments, consumer associations, and non-statutory authorities, encourage better awareness of halal products and services (Nik Muhammad et al., 2009). Understanding the notion of halal tayyiban, halal logo, halal integrity, halal industry operation, halal products by industry, and halal industrial training are all part of this promotional programme. The increasing level of awareness among Muslim customers is driving this trend. To cope with the tremendous bloom of the halal industry, halal practitioners at any level need to be trained with specific core competencies (Nurul Wahidah et al., 2021). Realizing the need for competent Halal graduates, several Malaysian public universities and colleges offered halal study programmes at the certificate and diploma levels for technical education connected to the halal concept (Noraizan & Syuhaida Idha, 2019). In addition, the Program Educational Objective (PEO) in the Halal studies Program need to be aligned with the industry's demand so that the Halal graduate readiness for the specific Halal core competencies.

According to the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE), about 20% of the over 290,000 new graduates joining the labour market each year must find work within six months of graduation. However, many graduates lack the skills, knowledge, and attitudes employers seek. Other than that, several factors contribute to the work-readiness issue among Halal graduates. In nurturing work readiness among graduates, work-based learning strategies were introduced. This approach requires the engagement of HEIs with industry to enhance workforce development, improve productivity and expose employees and employers to innovative research, knowledge transfer and creation of creative workplace learning opportunities (Mayombe, 2022). However, Halal-related program studies offered in Malaysia have not yet implemented the work-based learning approaches. Thus, the work readiness of Halal graduates is yet to be defined. In addition to that, Malaysian graduates are regarded as lacking in employability attributes.

Literature Review

Work-Readiness

Work readiness or preparedness is a novel concept in the literature on career development and training and development (Johnson, 1997). Furthermore, it is still in the early stages of development. It is difficult for everyone to agree on a single definition of job preparedness and the abilities and characteristics that signal job readiness. Despite the lack of unanimity, it is used as a selection factor for predicting graduate employment potential. Work readiness refers to the degree to which graduates are perceived to have the attitudes and qualities necessary to succeed. Graduate students have completed their bachelor's or master's degrees and are planning to enter the workforce.

The word "ready work" can be defined in various ways. Individuals willing to work are defined as having "the fundamental abilities required to achieve the minimum requirements for a given job as established through job analysis or job profile (Form-general, 2001).

Malaysian graduates reportedly lack specific personal and technical skills and other attributes, particularly multi-tasking capacity (Malaysian Productivity Corporation, 2018). In addition, issues on graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia were reported to remain unemployed for some time after graduation (Hussin et al., 2021). In 2020, the unemployment rate for new graduates rose to 25%, up from 13.8 per cent the year before, bringing the total number of recent unemployed graduates to 116,161 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Employers prefer the required knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) from fresh graduates (Hinai et al., 2020) and skills beyond educational background that align with current labour market demands. This leads to whether the current core competencies set by the Halal studies program meet the industry expectations, National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS) and Halal program educational objectives (PEO).

Graduates often need expertise in researching the halal industry, as many operators must adhere to policies and ethics in halal handling. Therefore, various parties have come forward to offer halal consumer education programs to provide awareness and readiness in understanding halal ethics and responsibilities towards halal students in venturing into the field of halal. It is aided by the sophistication of technology, which also expands the concept of halal awareness. In this regard, halal students must consider taking halal training recognised by the ministry, focusing on evidence in every corner of halal knowledge.

Therefore, students only get information on halal toyyiban solely through learning the subject of Islamic Education at the university. This indicates that awareness and understanding of education on the issue are not promoted in schools. As such, students are less exposed to halal and awareness of halal consumption, while Malaysia is an international halal hub that promotes halal integrity worldwide.

Since halal executives can have an extensive range of duties and responsibilities, related core competencies are one of the success factors in supporting comprehensive and future developments in the halal industry. However, several prior studies reported incompetency among Halal Executives, especially in matters related to the Halal system and management (Ahmad et al., 2017; Arif et al., 2019). Therefore, there needs to be an open debate about what it means to be 'work-ready' in diverse work contexts, as well as discussions about the role of HEIs in building ongoing Halal graduate employability in the workplace.

Core competencies of Halal Executive (HE)

The core competencies of Halal executives can be divided into three domains consist of knowledge, skill and attitude (Othman & Bahron (2016); Huda et al.,2021). The competencies were extracted based on content analysis of Occupational Structure Halal Industry 2009 (OSHI 2009), Occupational Framework Halal Industry 2018 (OFHI 2018) and Malaysian Halal Management System 2020 (MHMS 2020). Aside from establishing a Halal Assurance System (HAS) and an Internal Halal Committee, current manual procedures necessitate that Halal Executives be chosen by management in a global firm and midsize industry (IHC). In the meantime, management must select a Halal supervisor and Muslim employee to oversee halal certification issues in the small, medium, and micro industry categories. The core competencies of Halal Executives are reported by Huda et al., (2021), which comprises knowledge, skills and attitude that Halal Executives should possess.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach specific to the descriptive method. Primary data were collected through the survey questionnaire. Questionnaires were structured based on Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Halal Management students in the final semester of undergraduate level. The questionnaire was divided into three sections demographic background. Demographic variables include gender, age group, current semester and educational background. The second section consists of fifteen statements to determine the readiness level on the topic studied. This section consists of seven statements on the importance. Variables were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale to illustrate their degree of readiness. The scale point is depicted in Table 1. As for the interpretation of means, the value of 1.01 - 2.00 “Low”, 2.01 - 3.00 (Moderately low), 3.01 - 4.00 (Moderately high), 4.01 - 5.00 (High).

Table 3: Scale for readiness

Capabilities	Weak	Fair	Intermediate	Good	Excellent
Label	1	2	3	4	5

Results and Discussion

Respondents’ Demographic Background

Respondent demographic analysis of the study’s findings has been reported in this section. All the respondents’ background information, such as age, gender, semester, and level of education, was analysed. In this section, the method used to analyse the data is descriptive analysis. For gender distribution, Table 4 shows the analysed variables, i.e. male or female, of 104 respondents in this study. However, one respondent was excluded since it was found that she did not complete the questionnaire. The current studies only included semester 6 and 7 students since they are in the final semester and may get secure jobs after their internship. Researchers analyzed characteristics using frequency and percentage approaches. According to Table 4, the class concluded that female respondents outnumbered male respondents. As a result, respondents recorded 57 female respondents or 55.3 %. In contrast, male respondents accounted for 47 or 45.6 %, regarding the question about attending the Halal Executive program. There are a total of 65 respondents (63.1%) who have attended and taken a halal executive program, while there are a total of 38 respondents (36.9%) who have never taken a halal executive program.

Table 4: Demographic Background of Respondent

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	47	45.6
Female	57	55.3
Age		
18 years - 20 years old	8	7.8
21 years - 23 years	70	68
24 years - 26 years	24	23.3
27 years - 29 years	0	0
30 years above	1	1
Education level		
Diploma	19	17.5
Degree	85	82.5
Semester		
Semester 6	40	38.8
Semester 7	64	63.2
Possessed Halal Executive Certificate		
Yes	65	63.1
No	38	36.9

Most of the students who have taken the Professional Halal Executive certificate are students that are in the 6th semester and final semester. Moreover, most students enrolled for the professional certification since the government agenda under PENJANA 2021 subsidise the fees for almost 70%. This shows that respondents have the initiative to acquire specific professional certificates related to their careers.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha test was used to determine the reliability of the research instrument. The level of accuracy and software for the level of measurement produced by the research instrument is referred to as reliability. Also, a value of 0.60 and above is considered reliable and reasonable. The results of the reliability analysis test of this study are high and exceed the level of reliability used. Table 4.1 describes Cronbach's Alpha for the questions used in the questionnaire in this study. Abdelmageed et al., (2022) state that the accepted reliability value is 0.5 and above. All items regarding the contributing factors of knowledge, attitude, skills, and importance are acceptable with values of 0.714, 0.774, and 0.883. The total number of items shows that the research data obtained is 0.788, which is suitable reliability. Respondents have indicated the frequency of answers related to the data required by the researcher.

Table 4.1: Cronbach's Alpha for items according to its construct

Construct	Alpha Cronbach
Knowledge	0.714
Skill	0.774
Attitude	0.883

Descriptive Analysis

A halal executive can have a very wide range of duties and responsibilities which are associated with halal integrity. Table 4.2 depicts the overall descriptive analysis for readiness under related

construct to the halal industry specifically knowledge the, skills and attitudes of Halal Executives.

Table 4.2: Descriptive analysis of readiness level under Knowledge, Skills and Attitude

Knowledge		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
	Halal and Shariah			11	69	24	4.13	0.569
K1	I can understand the Halal-Toyyiban concept and Shariah law.							
	Halal Certification		1	7	66	30	4.20	0.597
K2	I am able to conduct a Halal certification application according to the requirements of the Malaysia Halal Application.							
	Halal Standards		1	9	59	35	3.95	0.813
K3	I can develop Hazards Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) management systems.							
	Internal Audit		2	10	55	37	4.22	0.696
K4	I can able to conduct an internal halal auditing process.							
Total							4.125	
Skill		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
	Digital Skills (MyEHalal)	56	18	23	6	1	1.20	1.167
S1	I can perform the application of the Malaysia Halal Certificate using MyEHalal							
	Analytical Skills		4	19	50	31	4.06	0.748
S2	I can monitor the sampling process for doubtful materials and product testing to ensure the finished product meets halal requirements.							
	Problem-Solving Skill	1	3	23	57	20	3.98	0.808
S3	I can advise on resolving non-conformance issues and reporting them to management.							
	Document Management Skill		2	16	58	28	3.97	0.814
S4	I can identify and manage halal documentation and records.							
	Technical Skill		1	20	60	23	4.01	0.764
S5	I can establish control measures identified in Risk Assessment to control the potential contaminants.							
	Internal Audit Management Skill		4	17	50	33	3.75	0.842
S6	I can perform Internal Halal audits, including supplier audits) to assess compliance with the halal requirement.							
Total							3.495	
Attitude		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
	Firm			5	56	43	4.37	0.579
A1	I can strictly firm to follow Halal certification as per rules and regulations.							
	High Integrity			10	58	36	4.25	0.624
A2	I adhere to halal and Shariah requirements at all times							
	Proactive		1	7	61	35	4.25	0.624
A3	I seek new information from the certification body, guidelines, and circulars related to my job scope.							
	Good Practicing Muslim			7	53	44	4.36	0.579
A4	I execute and practice the five Pillars of Islam in my life.							
	Committed			6	54	44	4.37	0.596
A5	I can perform any assignment as may be given from time to time by management.							
Total							4.317	
Total mean for all construct							3.979	

Readiness of competency under Knowledge

Under work-readiness for competency skill under knowledge, for halal graduates, knowledge of halal toyyiban can establish oneself by understanding the rights and obligations of being a Muslim. Based on Table 4.2, for K1, the study found that most respondents understood the halal toyyiban and Shariah law concepts with a mean of 4.13. This is evidenced by the number of respondents who answered excellent with the above statement as many as 24 people, equivalent to 23.1%. Then, followed by 69 respondents who responded (66.3%), 11 more people (10.6%) answered in the intermediate. Therefore, it can be concluded that the level of readiness for Halal core competencies under domain knowledge among UiTM Halal Management undergraduates is good. For K2, it can be observed that most of the respondents excelled at 33 (31.7%). It was also shown that 55 (52.9%) respondents were good at the statement of being able to implement the Malaysian Halal Certification application. This means that their skills in using My-Ehalal are excellent because some have taken the halal executive program practised in implementing halal certification applications. These findings supported by Huda et al., (2021), where Halal management undergraduate must possess digital skill and must have IT literacy in managing halal application. Therefore, the contributing factor for knowledge might be obtained through core courses taken in Bachelor (Hons) Halal Industry Management program. These results also suggest that the current syllabus is aligned with the work competency attributes under knowledge.

As for K3, 35 respondents (33.7%) are excellent and good respondents. However, nine respondents (8.7%) were intermediate and only 1 (1.0%) respondent answered fair. This means that a small number of them still need to understand HACCP management. Understanding and skills to develop HACCP are very important for Halal executives, especially in ascertaining the safety of products. Safety is one of the elements under the Toyyiban aspect especially when working in food product manufacturing industry. Next, for K4, 37 respondents (35.6%) excelled in understanding the internal audit process. It was followed by 55 (52.9%) respondents who answered well with this statement and another 10 (9.6%) who responded intermediate with it. Finally, 2 (1.9%) more respondents answered fair with the information. From these results, it can be concluded that their understanding of the internal audit process is good. From the result, it is seen that respondents have knowledge of the internal audit process. Halal auditing process is important skill as a halal graduate (Nik Muhammad Rosli et al., 2022). The knowledge might be contributed by Halal Management core courses of Halal internal audit course taken in their 6th semester. The overall mean for readiness level in acquired knowledge for a halal executive is 4.195 based on Table 4.2, and it is classified at a high level. This shows that the respondents agree that knowledge is essential for individuals to halal work for their future.

Readiness of competency under Skills

As for the work readiness under domain skill, the analysis was described in this section. Based on the findings in Table 4.2, S1, for digital skills, it can be observed that most of the respondents are weak in digital skills in performing the application for the Malaysia Halal certificate. This might be because no syllabus caters to mock applications for Malaysia Halal Certificate. Those who are excellent, are those who attended the Professional Halal Executive courses. This suggests that the current syllabus needs to be updated. As for S2, analytical skill, the mean value is 4.06. This shows that most of the respondents were able to monitor the sampling process for doubtful materials and product testing to ensure the finished product meets halal requirements. For S3, the respondents are excellent, 31 (29.8%). With a mean value of 3.98, students are likely to be concerned about halal-related matters continuously updated on the website or elsewhere.

As for the syllabus, Halal Management students were introduced to how to respond to non-conformance reports from authorities and handle product recall situations when they received complaints from a customer. Next, for S4, for readiness on documentation skills, the respondents are good with a mean value of 3.97 which is 28 (26.9%) excellent in managing documents related to halal. Halal graduates who take the halal executive program, know the difference between halal files and HAS records as they were tasked with creating those documents as part of continuous assessment in Halal class. This is aligned with studies by Nik Mohd Rosli et al., (2022), where managerial skills are essential for Halal graduates. As for S5 on technical skills, the respondent shows the mean of readiness at a value of 4.01 in establishing control measures identified in Risk Assessment to control the potential contaminants. This might be because respondents were taught in Halal Hazard and Risk Management (ISH553) class and Halal Assurance Management System (ISH603) class in conducting the risk assessment. As for the last part, under domain skill, S6, internal audit management skill. Results on the mean of readiness show 3.95. This shows respondents are good at performing Internal Halal audits, including supplier audits) to assess compliance with the halal requirement. Overall mean readiness under competency skills results shows slightly lower than knowledge skills with a mean value of 3.95. This might be because real work experience is needed to develop skills, and respondents can fully grab the skill in job training and can be further enhanced through the collaboration of education with industry to cater work-based learning (Ibrahim et al.,2022). Other than that, skills can be developed through a continuous assessment based on problem-based learning or case study. For example, students need to develop a specific Good Manufacturing Practice manual, or MeSTI manual for small industries, where they can develop work experience while pursuing their studies.

Readiness of competency under Attitudes

This section will discuss readiness under attitude. In maintaining halal integrity, Halal-competent practitioners should have a good attitude. According to Malaysia Standard MS 2691: 2021 Halal profession – General requirements, a cluster of attitudes comprising of a firm, high integrity, proactive, good practising Muslim, committed and so on must be possessed by practitioners to support stakeholders in the halal industry to deal with important issues such as complying with halal requirements and Halal Management Systems, protecting halal integrity and practising Islamic values. Overall means readiness on attitude for Halal Executive is 4.317. These results show that the respondent possessed high readiness level on attitude. This is essential for personnel to provide better value to stakeholders and ensure Halal Management System compliance. This standard is intended to improve the halal industry's effectiveness and accelerate the profession's development of the halal sector and accelerate the growth of the profession by improving the quality, professionalism, ethical behaviour, and interoperability of halal professionals (Huda et al., 2021). The overall total mean for all construct is 3.979, which indicate a moderate for readiness level of respondent toward the core competency of Halal executive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has successfully examined the level of readiness of the core competence domain of Halal Executives among Halal Management Graduates. It is hoped that more studies like this will be conducted to gain a more robust understanding and reliability in the future. But in general, this study has successfully achieved the objective goals set at the beginning of the study. Therefore, as a first step, being a responsible individual or organization should be recognised accordingly, and different initiatives should be implemented to increase students' readiness for the halal executive domain. The current studies also suggest that Higher

Education providers for Halal Studies should upgrade the current syllabus and incorporate more on the technical, documentation and digital skills in nurturing the graduate work readiness of Halal undergraduates. Future research tools should include an open-ended survey to gather additional variables, focusing on technical skills to help researchers better understand the subject matter and aspects related to the study from an individual perspective. A halal professional is a vital ecosystem component for guaranteeing the halal business's robustness, global competitiveness, and scalability of the halal business. In addition, Halal profession planning enables a comprehensive evaluation of industry demands regarding manpower requirements, career advancement, and training necessary for workers to attain the appropriate level of proficiency. This study has limitations regarding the number of participants, the scope of the study, and the variables used. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies be conducted with larger sample sizes, broader viewpoints, and new components if necessary.

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