



A Qualitative Inquiry on Factors Associated with Employability among University Graduates in Indonesia

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Abstract

Increasing number of unemployed people including university graduates in Indonesia indicates that universities do not generate required employability skills for students. This qualitative inquiry aimed to identify supporting factors for employability among Indonesian university graduates. One-on-one in-depth interview method was employed to collect data from participants (n=33). Data analysis was guided by a qualitative data analysis framework. The results showed work experience and networks as important supporting factors for employability of Indonesian university graduates. Higher-order thinking skills, basic academic skills, personal qualities and teamwork were also factors that increased the employment opportunity. The contribution of education background and Grade Point Average (GPA) to the employability of university graduates were reported to be relative, depending upon the criteria of each organization or institution. Level of demand for graduates and availability of job opportunities were also factors that played important roles in determining employability of university graduates. The findings indicate the needs for inclusion of internship as a part of study program at universities to provide students with opportunity to enter workforce, gain work experience, and establish network with other people. Improvement of capabilities to adapt to new situation and work in team, and learning to have integrity, responsibility creativity and communication skill, are also recommended to be taught.

Keywords:

Determinants;
Employability skills;
University graduates;
Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

Unemployment has been a major issue in Indonesia for a few decades. The current International Monetary Fund report (IMF, 2020), for example, has reported an increase of unemployment rate in the country from 5.3 percent in 2019 to 8 percent in 2020. Similarly, the number of unemployed people was also reported to rise from 6.87 million to 10 million during the same period (Trading Economics, 2020). University graduates are parts of the unemployed people due to inability to satisfy work requirements. This is an indication that university graduates are not well prepared in terms of employability skills required by the employers (Robinson, 2000; Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003).

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Globally, previous studies and reports have reported a range of employability determinants that support university graduates to obtain employment. For example, basic employability skills, including academic skills (reading, writing, listening, oral communication, science, and mathematics), higher-order thinking skills (learning, reasoning, creativity, problem solving and decision making) and personal qualities (responsibility, self-confidence, self-control, self-directed, self-motivated and self-management, social skills, good attitude, honesty, integrity, adaptability and flexibility, and team work), are reported as employability factors for university graduates (Robinson, 2000; Aida, Norailisi & Rozaini, 2015; Alston, Cromartie & English, 2009; Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, Kaiser, 2003). Mastering these skills can increase the likelihood of university graduates to get jobs. Other factors such as having leadership skill, work experience and network have also been reported to support the employability of university graduates (Chandler, Ringsell & Lindop, 2007; Cockill & Egan, 2021).

Despite the upward trend of unemployment including among university graduates, the evidence on the factors that hinder or support the employability of university graduates in the Indonesian context is still limited. This qualitative inquiry, therefore, aimed to identify factors supportive of employability of Indonesian university graduates with specialization in business management.

2. Method

Study Design

This was a qualitative inquiry using in-depth interviews. The use of qualitative research was useful since it helped to explore respondents' own values, meanings and interpretations regarding their behaviors, motives, setting and situation where they lived, experiences and social relationship in relation to employment (Creswell, 2007). It allowed the researchers to view the problem based on the perspectives of participants (Creswell, 2007). It provided insights into how respondents made sense of their experience and enabled researchers to know more about the context or setting where the study was conducted (Creswell, 2007; Fauk, Mwakinyali, Putra, Mwanri, 2017).

Study Sample

The participants of the study were the university graduates (n=33) with the specialization in business management. They were recruited using snowball sampling technique, starting with the distribution of the study information sheet containing the details of the field researchers on the information board of the business faculty of a university in the study setting. The potential participants who called to confirm their participation were recruited and interviewed. The initial participants were also asked to distribute the study information sheet to their friends and colleagues (Creswell, 2007). This non-probability sampling technique was employed based on the consideration that potential participants might be hard to find. This technique helped the researchers to recruit as many participants as required through initial participants. Another reason was that this technique provided the same odds for any potential participant to take part in this study.

This recruitment was an iterative process until the researchers felt that data saturation has been reached. The inclusion criteria for the selection of the participants were that one had to be a university graduate with specialization in business management and 18 years old or above.

Data Collection and Ethical Consideration

Data were collected by the researchers (NKF and SP) using in-depth interview method (Creswell, 2007). The interviews were focused on several key areas including basic academic skills, higher-order thinking skills, personal qualities, education background and GPA, and level of demand for university graduates. Some examples of the questions related to high-order thinking and personal qualities are: What skills do you think are required in your current job? Why do you think creativity is a skill required in your job? Do you think creativity helped you get and maintain your job? Would you describe more about what creativity means to you? Why do you think problem solving skill is required in your job? Would you describe how problem-solving skill has helped you in your employment? What personal qualities do you think are supportive of employability? Why do you think responsibility is a supporting factor for employability?

Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the aim of the study. They were advised that their participation in the study was voluntary and there would be no consequences if they decided not to withdraw their participation. They were also informed that the interview would take approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and would be digitally recorded, and that the information they provided during the interviews would remain anonymous and confidential. The anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved by assigning each participant with a study identification number (P1, P2, ...) to ensure that data or information provided will not link back to an individual in the future (Creswell, 2007). A written consent form was also provided to be signed and returned by each of them at the interview day. The participants were also advised that this study

obtained ethical approval from Bina Nusantara University, Indonesia. The interview with each participant was scheduled and took place at their convenient time and place. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed into coding sheets and analyzed to find the emerging themes using a qualitative data analysis framework (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). It involved five steps. The first step was *familiarization* with the data or transcripts by reading them line by line repeatedly, breaking down the data into several chunks, and giving comments or labels. The second step was *identification of a thematic framework*. In this step, recurrent key issues, concepts and themes were written down and a thematic framework or coding frame was used to develop coding scheme for the data. The third step was *indexing* to the entire data. Open coding by making a list of codes to look for similar and redundant codes to reduce a long list of codes to smaller and manageable number was conducted. This was followed by creating closed coding where codes that referred to the same theme were grouped together under the same theme. This process took several stages until a short list of 7 overarching themes was reached. The fourth step was *charting* the data through arrangement of appropriate thematic references in a summary chart so that it could be compared across the interviews and within each interview. The fifth step was *mapping* and *interpretation* to examine the ideas that made up a theme or sub theme in order to see the relationship and association between them (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Fauk & Mwanri, 2015; Fauk, Hawke, Mwanri, Ward, 2021).

3. Result

Work Experience

Work experience acquired through internship prior to graduation seemed to be a very important factor that supported the employability of university graduates. Most of the participants raised comments on the importance of work experience as an influential factor for gaining their current jobs. This was due to the fact that most organizations or institutions need work experience related to job being offered as a main requirement for recruitment:

“Work experience is very important because they [employers] will look at it. If they know you have work experience related to the job you are applying for then it is highly likely for you to get accepted. I am sure I get this job because I have related work experience” (P2).

“I was asked about my work experience during the interview. I am sure my employer wanted to know about whether or not my previous work was related to the job offered. Luckily, I had previously handled a job similar to this current one. I think my employer took it into consideration as well, that is why I was recruited” (P11).

“I learned about observation and training and was challenged to create online questionnaires during the internship period. After that I submitted my application to the current organization I am working for, and I got accepted. I think this organization recruited me because my work experience was similar to the current one” (P16).

Internship offered by universities or colleges during the study period was described to have a significant influence on the employment of university graduates. It was reported to support them getting their current jobs. Several interviewees commented that their first or current jobs were offered by the employers where they did the internship as a part of their bachelor program. The jobs were offered by the employers based on the assessment on their performance during the internship period:

“I did the internship for five months and after that my boss offered me opportunity to join the organization as a full-time staff. I think they liked my work performance during the internship.....” (P2).

“I worked part-time as a teacher at a school during my bachelor program, so after the graduation I applied to be a full-time teacher and I got accepted” (P4).

“I am working at PWC [Price Waterhouse Coopers], but prior to this I did internship at PWC for four months. After the internship the organization made an assessment about my performance and I was qualified, so I was directly accepted to work for this organization” (P5).

Networking

Networking was shown to be another supporting factor for the employability of university graduates in Indonesia. Most of the study participants described that they got their jobs through their own networks with family, friends, and lecturers. For instance, they knew about job vacancies at companies or organizations through their relatives or friends who were working for the same companies or organizations:

"I knew about job vacancy at the current organization I am working for from my aunty. She knew it from her husband who also works for this organization. She taught I was eligible for this job, so she encouraged me to apply. I submitted my application and attended the interview and got it" (P1).

"I knew about job vacancy at the current organization I am working for from my aunty. She knew it from her husband who also works for this organization. She taught I was eligible for this job, so she encouraged me to apply. I submitted my application and attended the interview and got it" (P1).

"I knew about job vacancy at my current institution from a friend of mine who was a staff of human resource division at this institution" (P3).

"My former boss was the one who told me about the job vacancy, I applied and succeeded, and I have been working for this institution for a few years" (P22).

"One of my lecturers linked me up to my current job. Firstly, I signed the contract for one year but after that I was asked to be a full-time staff" (P23).

"My friend's dad is the human resource manager in this company. I heard about the vacancy from him. He asked me to send my CV and a week later, I was called for interview and got accepted" (P24).

Furthermore, several participants also expressed that social media, *Job Street* (information provider of job vacancies) and websites were also the media through which they obtained information about the availability of job vacancies of their current jobs:

".... I searched through social media. I found information about the job vacancy of my current job through LinkedIn and then I applied." (P15).

"I knew about the job vacancy of my current job through internet, I searched the website of CIMB [Commerce International Merchant Bankers]" (P7).

"I searched the website of my company [Agung Podomoro Group] and found the job vacancy, so I applied and succeeded" (P16).

".... This organization has its own website and I knew about this job from its website...." (P30).

Personal Qualities

Personal qualities or skills were also reported to support employability of university graduates in Indonesia. Those with qualities or skills required by employers seemed highly likely to get a job. Personal qualities or skills that were most often put forward by the majority of the study participants as the factors supportive of employability were responsibility and self-motivation:

"Responsibility is a very important personal quality required by my employer. I believe being responsible for my work and tasks is a strong factor that supports my position in the current institution. I always try to get my work done even though sometimes the results are not excellent" (P2).

"I think my employer supports my current job because I am a responsible person. The scope of my current job is too wide, and it is difficult, but I always finish my tasks on time" (P5).

"Self-motivation is very important, each work needs to be finished on time. I was asked whether I can deal with tight schedule and I said yes. So, I need to have good self-motivation to do my work every day. I think this is one of the reasons I am still working for this company up to now" (P33).

A few participants also mentioned several other personal qualities which they perceived as factors that had helped them get their current jobs, such as ability to adapt to new working situation and condition, and to work in team, flexibility and integrity:

"I think ability to adapt to new situation and work environment is an important factor that supports employability. I told the interviewer that I am very quick to adapt to new situations, tasks and duties. I got accepted and have proven it to them [bosses]" (P5).

"I am sure one of the things that made them [bosses] recruited me is because I convinced them that I can adapt to my new tasks or work very quickly, and now I lead a team in my institution" (P3).

"Ability to work in team is a skill my company looks for because we mostly work in team in this company. I can work very well in team, and I think this explains why the company needs me" (P12).

"Integrity and ability to work in team are my strong aspects, that is why I am still holding this job" (P9).

"To me integrity is one of the most important factors supportive of employability. I am working in bank sector, integrity is number one because I deal with money every day" (P7).

Basic Academic Skills

Basic academic skills seemed to have a significant influence on the employability of the study participants. One of the basic academic skills that was put forward by interviewees as a supporting factor for their employment in their current organizations or institutions was communication skill. Good communication was therefore seen as one of the important skills required by their employers and as a part of their role to deal or communicate with clients as well as other colleagues on daily basis:

"I am sure my organization needs staff with good communication skill I have the skill to communicate with people, including colleagues, boss and clients. It is very important for my organization because it deals with property and that means good communication and relationship especially with clients is the priority" (P9).

"Communication skill is very important and required in my current job because I have to communicate with clients, including the very rich ones. I have that skill and I think that is the reason I am still working at the bank sector" (P7).

"My core responsibility in the current job is as a trainer for new staff, so I need to be communicative and explain things clearly. I am thankful to have this good communication skill. I think the interviewer could see it during the interview, and through the way I answered his questions and explained my thoughts" (P25).

Higher-Order Thinking Skills

Creativity as an aspect of higher-order thinking was also reported as a supporting factor for employment of the participants. Several of them pointed out creativity of employees as an aspect required by their institutions:

"To work in my current institution, staff need to be creative. For example, I should be very creative in developing working procedure because everything in finance sector should be done based on procedure. So, working procedure should be developed first and then apply it to each client, hence the procedure could be different for each client" (P12).

"One of the aspects supportive of employability is creativity. In my work it is highly required to be creative. For instance, if there is a problem related to my job then I should be creative to find out the solution. I should also know what my employer wants from me" (P1).

"I am a creative person. I like to propose new ideas, like to do new things. I explained about myself and what I like to do to the manager and the manager probably liked what I have, so I was accepted to be an employee here" (P30).

Problem solving skills and ability to produce logical thinking was also brought up as another higher-order thinking skills that contributed to employability of the participants. Several interviewees considered these as the aspects that helped them get their jobs:

“Problem solving skill is highly required here. It seems like there are always problems in my work. I need to be ready to offer solutions and luckily, I have done very well with all problems I face so far, and I think that helps me to stay in this institution” (P26).

“Thinking logical and being able to provide possible solutions are main aspects required in my work. I was told in the very beginning that I need to have such skills and I convinced the boss who interviewed me that I am capable of thinking logical and solving problem” (P29).

“.... Thinking logical means being able to provide solution and take the right decision. These skills are highly required here [in his organization]. I find that these are not easy to do in my work, but I can do well so far” (P31).

Education Background and GPA

Education background seemed to also influence the employability of university graduates. Several interviewees commented that education background related to the job being offered increased the possibility of getting accepted as employers tended to look at education background of applicants to see whether an applicant was eligible for the tasks being offered:

“It is clear that they [employers] looked at the education background of the applicants. I think I was recruited because my education background is related to my current job” (P11).

“.... Education background is important, I am sure it was an aspect they considered in their decision to recruit me” (P15).

“.... I think it [education background] has an influence on my employer’s decision to recruit me because during the interview the interviewers asked about my education background” (P23).

However, a few other study participants commented that education background was not an aspect considered supportive of their employability. It was because education background was not an aspect explored by the interviewers during the job interviews:

“Human resource division in my organization did not look at education background but related work experience” (P2).

“They [interviewers] did not really care about education background during the interview but the logic I had in solving problem. So, they gave me a problem and let me propose logical solution to the problem” (P21).

The study participants also raised different points about GPA. Several of them described that GPA was a supporting factor for employability because their employers put a certain standard to GPA as a requirement for recruitment. They commented that applicants with GPA lower than the minimum standard set up by employers would not be notified to go to the next step of recruitment or were considered ineligible:

“GPA is a requirement considered for staff recruitment. My institution puts a minimal standard of 3.0” (P17).

“Yes, GPA is very important. In my institution, GPA of applicant should be at least 3.0, if GPA of applicants is less than 3.0 then they will not be informed to attend interview and next recruitment steps” (P16).

“One of the things they [interviewers] asses during the screening stage is GPA, so if GPA is under the minimum standard, then an applicant is considered failed” (P15).

“If someone wants to be a full-time employee in my organization then GPA is a must. I mean it should reach the minimum standard set up the institution” (P5).

"It is very important, human resource division in my institution does not trust people with GPA less than 2.75" (P10).

However, several other participants commented that GPA was not used as a requirement for recruitment of employees in their organizations, hence considered less influential towards employability of university graduates:

"GPA is not an influential aspect, the most important thing is work experience related the job offered. I am sure I am recruited because I have that experience" (P6).

"It [GPA] was not a big deal, the interviewers investigated about what have done or my previous work and did not ask about GPA at all" (P9).

Level of Demand for Graduates and Job Opportunities

Employability of university graduates seemed to be also determined by level of demand for graduates and availability of job opportunities. The interviewees described that the demand for university graduates seemed to gradually decrease and this was believed to lessen the chances and create difficulties for many university graduates to get a job:

"Individual skills are very important because they are the things that employers want to make use of or expect from employees but if the demand is less, then it is still difficult get a job no matter how good your skills are. Some of my friends have applied for jobs too many times but they still don't get the jobs they want, and I think that is because the demand is less" (P4).

"In my opinion, the demand for university graduates in my field of study seems to become less and less, this made me worried when I was about to graduate. I believed in my personal qualities or knowledge and skills I have but I was thinking that there are many other people with the same field of study as me, while the demand, in terms of number, seems less than the number of graduates. The number of job opportunities remains the same. I am just lucky to get this job right after my graduation" (P10).

The increase in the number of university graduates with the same field of study: "University graduates with specialization on business significantly increase annually" (P18) and limited availability of job opportunities: "Nowadays, job opportunities are very limited, all the positions seem to have been filled in by previous graduates" (P27), were the main reasons underpinning the participants' claim about the decrease of demand for university graduates. These were indicated to influence employability of university graduates.

"I think the reasons why the demand for university graduates seems to decrease are because there are hundreds or even thousands of university graduates with specialization in management every year, while job opportunities remain the same. I think availability of job opportunities plays a crucial role in the employability of university graduates" (P21).

".... The number of university graduates in a certain field of study such as management study outnumbers job opportunities available for them. This means that not all university graduates with specialization in management will be recruited. I applied for this job together with more than ten people with the same education background, but I was the only one who got accepted. There was only one position available at that time" (P8).

4. Discussion

The current study aims to identify factors that support the employability of Indonesian university graduates with specialization in business management. Consistent with the previous findings (Chandler, Ringsell & Lindop, 2007; Paisey&Paisey, 2010; Snell, 1990; Heijden, 2002), the current study reports that work experience was an important supporting factor for employability of the participants. This was due to the fact that employers were interested in applicants who have had previous work experience related to the field being offered. Therefore, related work experience was one of the items used by employers as one of the eligibility criteria for a job being offered. Supporting the results of previous studies (Robinson, 2000, Rabey, 2008; Curtis, 2002), the present study suggests several personal qualities such as responsibility, adaptability, integrity, flexibility, and teamwork as the factors supportive of employability of university graduates in Indonesia. Some example these personal qualities are being honest in managing finance of companies they worked for (integrity), and willingness to change or compromise with customers or clients in regard to

meeting schedule and venue (flexibility). The reason was that the organizations or institutions they were working for searched for these personal qualities as the important aspects supportive of good work performance. However, other personal qualities including self-confidence, self-control, self-directed, and self-management, social skills, and good attitude that have been reported elsewhere to support work performance (Robinson, 2000; Aida, Norailis&Rozaini, 2015; Rabey, 2008; Curtis, 2002), were not the case of the current study.

Findings of the current study also report creativity as an aspect of higher-order thinking skills that supported the employability of the study participants. Creativity seemed to be very specific to the context of each study participant. For example, to some participants creativity was referred to as a skill to come up with new ideas and how to put them into practice. It was also seen as flexibility to make adjustment to procedure, time and schedule that can facilitate meetings and collaborations with clients. Problem solving was articulated in relation to the skill of an employee to solve any problem encountered with available resources. Similarly, to some participants logical thinking was seen as a skill of employees to incorporate logic into their thinking process in identifying and analyzing a problem in order to come up with possible solutions. It was also understood as a skill to make right decision about a problem and provide solution to it. This is in line with previous findings (Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic& Kaiser, 2012), reporting creativity as a part of employability skills required in workforce. However, other aspects of higher-order thinking, including learning, reasoning, problem solving and decision making reported in previous studies to support employability (Robinson, 2000; Aida, Norailis&Rozaini, 2015; Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic& Kaiser, 2012; Lorraine & Sewell, 2007) did not emerge in the current study. The current study's findings also report communication as one of the basic academic skills that supported the employability of several study participants. This was because the organizations or institutions they worked for dealt with financial and bank sector where they were required to build up good relationships with clients and convince clients to invest. However, other aspects of basic academic skills including reading, writing, listening, science, and mathematics, reported in several previous studies as supporting employability factors (Robinson, 2000; Rabey, 2008; Lorraine & Sewell, 2007; Barnett, nd), were not diagnosed in this study. The role of former students who have joined workforce, and of managers or supervisors as mentors or coaches for fresh university graduates reported in previous studies to increase employability among university graduates (Cockill& Egan, 2012; Afrassa, 2001; Bagshaw, 1997; Sturges, Guest, Mac Davey, 2000) was not identified in this study. This study's results suggest that the participants were linked to job vacancies through their network with families or relatives, friends and former lecturers. Findings of this study also suggest an indication of low level of demand for university graduates with specialization in business as an added factor determining employability of university graduates. The increase in the number of university graduates annually and limited job opportunities were reported as the reasons for the less demand for university graduates.

The current study reports different findings on the role of education background and GPA in increasing employability opportunities of university graduates. On the one hand, a few study participants indicated that education background and GPA were the factors that increased the chances of getting a job. This was because some employers put a certain standard on the level of GPA and gave priority to applicants with education background which is in line with the job being offered. This supports the previous findings (Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic& Kaiser, 2012; Juhdi, et al, 2010), reporting that university graduates with high GPA and education background similar to the job being offered have higher opportunity to secure the job than the others. On the other hand, results of the current study also show that a few other participants did not consider education background and GPA as the supporting factors for their employability because their employers were interested in applicants with related work experience. This finding supports the results of previous studies (Judge, et al, 1995; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Ume-Amen, 2014), reporting a less significant contribution of education background and GPA to employability of university graduates.

Study Limitations and Strengths

Findings of the current study should be interpreted with caution to several limitations. Firstly, this study involved limited number of participants and as the consequence, the results of the current study are less likely to be transferred to other university graduates in Indonesia and globally. Secondly, the participants were university graduates with the same specialization, which have resulted in under-sampling of other university graduates with different specializations. This might have resulted in incomplete overview of the factors associated with employability of university graduates in Indonesia. Despite these limitations, these findings could still be used to inform universities in Indonesia to design their study programs that integrate all necessary aspects that prepare university students to enter workforce. Besides, to our knowledge this current study represents the first qualitative investigation of factors associated with employability of university graduates in the Indonesian context. Further studies with a larger number of heterogeneous participants from

different sites and with different specializations, are recommended since the results of such studies can be transferable to larger university graduates in Indonesia and other similar settings.

5. Conclusion

The present study reports several supporting factors for the employability among Indonesian university graduates. Having a work experience related to a job being offered by an organization or institution, and networks with families or relatives, friends, and lectures, were reported as important factors that increased the likelihood of securing a job. Other factors reported to enhance the opportunity of university graduates to get a job were higher-order thinking skills such as creativity, basic academic skills such as communication, and personal qualities including responsibility, adaptability, integrity, and team work. The influence of education background and GPA on employability of university graduates were reported to be relative, depending upon the criteria of each organization or institution. The findings indicate the needs for the inclusion of internship as a part of study program at universities to provide students with opportunities to enter workforce and get work experience. This would also provide them with opportunities to establish network with other people, and to gain job after the graduation. Improvement of capabilities to adapt to new situation, to work in team, and learning to have integrity, responsibility and creativity, and communication skill are also recommended to be addressed during the study period.

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