Graduates' Employment: The Value of Curtin University of Technology Sarawak's Graduates

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Abstract

The main objectives of this research are to study the value of Curtin University of Technology Sarawak's graduates in 2006, graduates' perception on Curtin and recommendation on programmes offered. Questionnaires were distributed to School of Business and School of Engineering's graduates before the Graduation Ceremony held on 11th May 2006 at the Imperial Hall, Mega Hotel. The study found that the employment rate is 64.9% in 2006. Unemployment rate dropped from 36% in 2004 to 25.3% in 2005 and then increased to 35.1% in 2006, however, from this unemployment group, it is found that 58.5% was 'Still seeking for work' scenario, while 32.3% took a break, 6.2% further studies, 1.5% choose not to work and 1.5% find difficult in getting a suitable job. The study also shows that around 69.17% of the Curtin's graduate salary ranges are between RM1000 – RM1500 and RM1500 – RM1800. Majority of students are very satisfied with the programmes offered by the university and they even like to recommend it to their family members to study in this institution. However, number of recommendations was provided by the graduates to improve the quality of the programs. All the programmes should be relevant to the needs of the industry, especially industry training and practical work experiences, constant visitation to industry workplaces for better learning, applications towards theoretical components and increased contemporary knowledge currently practiced at the workplace to be brought into the classroom.

Keywords: Graduates' employment, Curtin University of Technology

1. Introduction

70% of public universities and institutes of higher learning graduates in Malaysia are unemployed. This is in contrast with 26% for private institutions of higher learning and 34% for foreign graduates (Ram, 2006). The statistic published by Department Of Statistics Malaysia (2007) shows that the total labour force in Q1 2007 is 10,826,700 compare to 2006 is 10,628.900. The total employed in Q1 2007 is 10,461,300 compare to 2006 is 10,275,400. The statistic also shows that the total of unemployed is 353,600 in Q1 compare to 365,400 in 2006. 20,217 graduates registered with the Ministry of Human Resources' Job Clearing System were still unemployed. The breakdown showed Mara University of Technology (UiTM) as having the highest number of unemployed graduates with 3,278 (16.2%) followed by North University of Malaysia (UUM) 1,532 (7.6%), private institutions of higher learning 1,217 (6%), University Technology of Malaysia (UTM) 1,147(5.7%), National University of Malaysia (UKM) 971 (4.8%), University Putra Malaysia 919 (4.5%), other public institutions of higher learning 840 (4.2%), University of Malaya (UM) 531 (2.6%), University Science of Malaysia (USM) 505 (2.5%), University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) 371 (1.8%), International Islamic University (UIA) 358 (1.8%), foreign graduates 342 (1.7%), University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) 174 (0.9%), University Education of Sultan Idris (UPSI) 39 (0.2%) and others 7,993 (39.5%) (Ram, 2006).

The breakdown based on job sector found that ICT shows the highest number of unemployed graduates with 3,942 (19.5%) yet to find jobs. This is followed by Business Administration with 2,714 (13.4%), Accountancy 1,923 (9.5%), Electric/Electronic and Telecommunication engineers 1,229 (6.1%), Human Resources Management 1,022 (5.1%), Civil Engineers 983 (4.9%), Mechanical/Mechatronic Engineers 884 (4.4%), Literature Social Science 843 (4.2%), Pure Science 770 (3.8%),

Financial/banking/insurance/investment/property 613 (3%), Office technology Management/Information management/Library Management 552 (2.7%), Architecture/Building/Quantity Surveying/ land surveying 540 (2.7%), Applied Science 533 (2.6%), Economy 440 (2.2%), Agriculture/Forestry, Fisheries/Environment 401 (2%) and others 2,828 (13.9%) (Ram, 2006).

A study by Badarulzaman (1993) found that the graduate workers do contribute significantly to enhance the competitiveness of manufacturing industry. Evidence also supports that the significance of quality university education in developing better-educated graduates to improve industrial competitiveness. The quality of university education also improves significantly graduate employment prospects with manufacturing companies. A closer relationship between university and the industries can be a key in promoting the development of academic courses quality, work experience placements, and career, and labour market information to produce graduate workers who ultimately contribute to improve industrial competitiveness.

2. Literature Review

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said that Universities must work closely with the industrial sector, including in co-curriculum development, to ensure their graduates are relevant to market demand. The co-operation was crucial to avoid a gap between the graduates churned out by local universities and the industries' needs. University co-curriculum must be compatible and relevant to the industrial sector's requirements (Bernama, 2007). Even, Rogow (1993) mentioned that curricula must balance theoretical with industrial knowledge.

The educational institutions should take certain steps to develop sound marketing strategies. Such steps include the analysis of internal and external environments so that the educational institution can identify major marketing opportunities and determine which of these can be seized with limited resources. Additionally, educational institutions must come up with clear marketing objectives that consider issues such as market segmentation, targeting and positioning, and selected consumer demographics (Kotler and Fox, 1995). This process is consistent with the concepts of Sarvary and Elberse (1995) argued that after a market environment analysis three essential methods should be used for the design of a successful marketing strategy including market segmentation, target market selection and product positioning (Ho and Hung, 2008).

The emphasis on skills required by employers varies depending on the type of job role to be carried out within an organisation. However there has been some consensus of opinion on the importance of transferable or employability skills for employees, particularly for those in management positions. These skills refer to certain personal abilities of an individual, which can be taken from one job role to another, used within any profession and at any stage of their career. To enhance employability, graduates are directed to their careers service for assistance on areas such as completing applications, interview techniques, assessment centres and personal development (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). A study by Juhdi, Jauhariah and Yunus (2007) proved that interpersonal (4.20) can be considered as important factor on employability skills. The other important factors are teamwork (4.06), communication (4.01), problem solving (3.95), adaptability (3.92), and leadership (3.82).

Substantial training and development opportunities is broadly recognised as an important feature in attracting and retaining new graduate recruits (Association of Graduate Recruiters, 1999; Sturges and Guest, 1999; Connor et al., 1990; Sturges et al., 2002; Jenner and Taylor, 2000; Hogarth et al., 2007; Jenner, 2008). From the organisational perspective, a graduate training programme can provide a skilled talent pool based on shared, organisational wide competences and technical capabilities meeting immediate staffing and future leadership needs (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2002; Jenner, 2008).

Ball (1988), Carlson and Wetherbe (1989), Connolly (1988) and Nelson (1991) highlighted that ICT professionals who possess sufficient human relations and management training enabling them to communicate effectively, remain a scarce and vital resource for the development of viable economies.

Even, number of frameworks has been discussed related to curricula must balance theoretical with industrial knowledge.

- Traditional universities build students' skills; conceptual and practical alike; through traditional lectures, tutorials, seminars, and workshops (Ball, 1995).
- There has been a trend towards more inspired teaching methods in which lecturers enhance theoretical contents through their own business experience or through the use of case study simulating the world of work (Burrows, 1999).
- Mulhaney et al. (2004) present a framework to facilitate the industry-academia interaction. This model is based on bringing into the classroom business managers/owners who brings real issues that are current and significant to the company. Students develop their professional skills through working on a case in groups and

directly interacting with business personnel.

- Rabayah, Palestine, J. and Sartawi, B. (2008) addressed the acquisition of professional competences through a separate institution. Physically, the centre is positioned in close proximity to the university campus so as to facilitate students and faculty access to its resources and to promote cooperation. It also allows for and actively promotes interaction with the business community such that both the university and business community work together to develop training content which will fill the gaps in graduates' competencies and fulfill the needs of business.

3. Objectives

The main objectives of this research are to study the value of Curtin University of Technology Sarawak's graduates and graduates' perception on Curtin, as well as recommendations provided by students on the programmes offered by Curtin.

4. Methodology

Questionnaires were distributed to graduates before the Graduation Ceremony held on 11th May 2006 at the Imperial Hall, Mega Hotel. Out of 218 graduates, 185 graduates completed this questionnaire (84.86%).

5. Results

5.1 Demographics

The graduates mainly are Chinese (90.82%), Indian (0.54%), Bumiputera (6.48%) and others (2.16%) in the year of 2006. 94% of graduates are Malaysians and 6% of graduates are International Students, i.e. Brunei, Maldivian, Pakistani and Chinese. The study found that 73 (39.5%) of graduates are male while 112 (60.5%) are female. It is revealed that more females are interested in higher education/tertiary studies compared to males. 100% of graduates are completing their first degree in a full-time mode.

5.2 Field of Study

The graduates completed their academic programmes are from two main faculties, i.e. the School of Business and School of Engineering. Within the School of Engineering, graduates majoring in Chemical; Electronic; Communications and Computer Science; Civil and Construction; Electrical; Mechanical; Technology; and Science comprised of 28.1% of total graduates in 2006. The remaining 71.9% of graduates are from the School of Business, majoring in Accounting and Finance; Finance and Marketing; Accounting and Information Systems; Marketing and Management; Business Administration; Mass Communication; Finance and E-Commerce; Finance and Management; and Marketing and E-Commerce.

5.3 Number of Graduates

The total graduates were larger than ever before and the survey achieved an impressive response rate of 84.9% compare with previous year. Table 1 provides an overview of the graduates for 2004, 2005 and 2006.

5.4 Graduates' Employment for 2005 and 2006

Unemployment rate dropped from 36% in 2004 to 25.3% in 2005 and then increased to 35.1% in 2006. In this group of 35.1%, it is found that 58.5% was 'Still seeking for work' scenario, while 32.3% took a break, 6.2% further studies, 1.5% choose not to work and 1.5% find difficult in getting a suitable job. Table 2 provides an overview of the employment status for graduate in 2005 and 2006.

5.5 Salary Range for Graduate in 2006

The study shows that around 69.17% of the Curtin's graduate's salary ranges are between RM1000 – RM1500 and RM1500 – RM1800 (see Table 3). The largest groups are graduated with Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting and Finance) and Bachelor of Engineering (Chemical).

5.6 Open Ended Questions Analysis

The study based on open-ended questions shows that 69.6% would like to further their studies at the same level in this institution if they are given the opportunity again. 91% respondents are very satisfied and would like to recommend it to their family members to study in this institution.

75.8% of respondents agree that their study structure has exposed to the current general knowledge and development around the world. The main reasons are to increase knowledge on current world issues, especially ability to adapt to changes; IEEE, EIA/TIA standards, ISO, CAD/CAM and TQM were learnt; and assignments were good in providing greater exposure to current issues. However, number of respondents did not agree with this statement because did not exposure much towards industrial training due to small community in Miri. The

academic workload is also too much and thus, affected time for approaching and applying real work situation; and even lecturer are not helpful.

Number of suggestions provided by respondents how to improve the quality of programmes offered by Curtin. The main recommendations are to improve and build on current facilities and services offer to students, such as laboratories, library resources, computer/IT availability and other facilities, which provides conducive environment for tertiary study for students within the University. The other suggestions are more practical and work experiences for students during University life to prepare these students for the 'real world'. Some indicated integration of theoretical and practical components, whilst, some insisted on making industrial training compulsory. Academic/Teaching staffs were encouraged to provide more up-to-date teaching materials and provide better teaching services to students.

Related to the new aspects to be emphasised or included in the programmes is it should be relevant to the needs of the industry, respondents believes that industry training and practical work experiences are two important elements, as well as constant visitation to the industry workplaces for better learning, applications towards theoretical components and increased contemporary knowledge currently practiced at the workplace to be brought into the classroom.

Finally, to produce graduates who are competent and more employable, it ranges from inner positive attributes of self such as good communication skills, presentation skills, and others. Lecturers and academic staff are also important to enhance positive student development and facilitating life-long learners' qualities. Career related workshops and seminars are also important for final year student to further prepare the transition from student life to employee life. Industrial training and workplace training was also emphasised in producing competent and employable graduates.

6. Conclusion

The finding shows that it is a positive inclination towards quality of academic programmes and services to students. However, it requires continuous improvements to build on current inefficiencies for corporate sustainability in the competitive higher education industry of Malaysia. Number of suggestions provided by the graduates how to improve the quality of the programmes. This includes the new aspects of knowledge and skills that relevant to the needs of the industry, especially industry training and practical work experiences. Beside that, constant of industry visits for better learning, applications towards theoretical components and increased contemporary knowledge currently practiced at the workplace to be brought into the classroom.

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Table 1. An overview of the graduate for 2004, 2005 and 2006

Course	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**
Bachelor of Commerce	70	98	128
Bachelor of Arts	0	0	5
Bachelor of Engineering/Science	16	35	52
MBA	8	13	0
Total Number of Graduates	94	146	185

Table 2. An overview of the Employment Status for Graduate 2005 and 2006

Employment Status for Graduate	**2005**	**2006**
Employed	109	120
Unemployed	37	65
Total of Respondent	146	185

Table 3. Salary Range for Graduate in 2006

Overall Salary Range for Graduate 2006							
Salary Range	**Number of Student**						
Below RM 1000	7						
RM 1000 - RM 1500	48						
RM 1500 - RM 1800	35						
RM 1800 - RM 2000	6						
Above RM 2000	13						
NA	11						
Total	**120**						
Monthly Income by Course							
Salary Range/Course	**Number of Student**						
Bachelor of Arts							
Below RM 1000							
RM 1000 - RM 1500	1						
RM 1500 - RM 1800							
RM 1800 - RM 2000							
Above RM 2000	1						
Not Available							
Bachelor of Commerce	**A&F**	**A&M**	**BBA**	**F&EC**	**F&M**	**M&EC**	**M&M**
Below RM 1000	2		1		1	2	1
RM 1000 - RM 1500	33		3			4	5
RM 1500 - RM 1800	13				1	3	4
RM 1800 - RM 2000	1						
Above RM 2000	2						3
Not Available							
Bachelor of Engineering	**BT**	**C&C**	**C**	**CS**	**E&C**	**E**	**M**
Below RM 1000					1	1	
RM 1000 - RM 1500					1	1	
RM 1500 - RM 1800			15	2			
RM 1800 - RM 2000	1		1			1	2
Above RM 2000	1		3			3	
Not Available			7				

A&F: Accounting & Finance
A&M: Accounting & Marketing
BBA: Bachelor of Business Administration
F&EC: Finance & E-Commerce
F&M: Finance & Marketing
M&E-Commerce: Finance & E-Commerce
M&M: Marketing & Management

BT: Bachelor of Technology
C&C: Civil & Construction Engineering
C: Chemical
CS: Computer System
E&C: Electronic & Communication
E: Electrical
M: Mechanical