A Case Study of Entrepreneurial Skills of Higher Education Graduates in an Islamic College in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to explore entrepreneurial skills of higher education graduates; specifically the Islamic college graduates in Pahang concerning their entrepreneurial skills. Interviews were conducted with ten (10) employers from various fields to gauge their perceptions, expectations and hiring opportunity of the Islamic college graduates in relation to the skills. Findings from the study derived from the qualitative data has generated four themes that are entrepreneurial skills are individual interest, entrepreneur non-friendly practices, nil opportunity for entrepreneurship and employee's entrepreneurial motivation. The study implies that communicating the idea to develop entrepreneurial skills among graduates demand conscientious strategies from educators. Though the skills are individual pursuit, the opportunity from employers is also a significant factor in determinining whether or not graduates can build the interest.

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Key Word: entrepreneurial skills, employer, Islamic college

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial skills as defined by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (in Shakir, 2009) concerns with ability to venture into business and work-related opportunities while creating risk awareness. The skills include the ability to identify business opportunities and be able to prepare, build, and explore business plans which eventually leads to self-employment. In Malaysia, particularly in the 10th Malaysia Plan, the government has determined that creativity can be developed through entrepreneurial skills (Othman, Othman & Ismail, 2012). At tertiary level, the skills have been incorporated in the curriculum (Keat, Selvarajah, Meyer & 2011; Tay, 2001). Sadly, however, claims from employers showed that the skills were only minimally possessed by the graduates (Rahman, Mokhtar & Hamzah, 2011). This study, therefore, seeks to explain employers' perceptions, expectations and hiring opportunity based on the entrepreneurial skills among Islamic college graduates. Specifically, this research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the employers' perceptions of the Islamic college graduates in relation to their entrepreneurial skills?
2. Do the entrepreneurial skills of the Islamic college graduates match with the employers expectancies?
3. How do the employers take into account the entrepreneurial skills when hiring the Islamic college graduates?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a quite number of studies that relate to entrepreneurial skills among graduates for the past five years in Malaysia. On the other hand, literatures on the employers' views among graduates in the country within the years 2009 until 2014 are still scarce. Concerning the latter focus, a survey conducted by Zaharim, Omar, Yusoff, Muhamad, Mohamed, & Mustapha (2009) revealed that employers are quite satisfied with the entrepreneurial skills that were possessed by engineering students. In hiring new engineers, employers felt that basic entrepreneurial skills in terms of knowledge and experience were important for their future employment.

Similarly, in an analysis of employability among engineering graduates, Omar, Yusoff, Muhamad, Mohamed and Mustapha (2010) found that employers expect graduates to possess basic entrepreneurial skills. Based on the Malaysian Engineering Employability Skills Framework (MEES) it was evident that the skills are also required by other employers especially in the developed countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Japan and European United. The research concluded that personal attributes, personal skills, and knowledge in entrepreneurship are required by stakeholders or employers in Malaysia.

On the other hand, it seems that entrepreneurial skills are among the vital skills, beside other employability skills, that technical graduates need to demonstrate. A survey carried out by Rasul, Rauf, Mansor, Yasin and Mahamod' study (2013) revealed that it was not only the managers and the specialists in entreprenuership's field that should get a business. Yet, getting a business was every employees' effort. The employers that were surveyed and interviewed in the study also pointed out

that graduates were expected to manage resources, and consequently, able to initiate business opportunity.

Another survey research, which involved technical students as their respondents was conducted by Rahman, Mokhtar & Hamzah (2011). Their study showed that the students' entrepreneurial skills obtained the second lowest mean besides other generic skills; leadership skills. Their study further reported that there was a need to enhance students' generic skills, especially their entrepreneurial as well as leadership skills. This could be achieved by making educators understand the notion of entrepreneurship. As a recommendation, it is suggested that educators engage students with various learning activities to develop the entrepreneurial skills of the latter.

Industrial training may be regarded as a benchmark for students to develop their entrepreneurial skills. Muda, Din, Majid, Ahmad, Shahabudin, Rambely and Suradi (2012) found that mathematical sciences students might develop the skills since sending them for industrial training might enable the knowledge learnt in class to be enhanced in such environment. From their survey, it was found that the training might serve as a ground to obtain working experiences especially in developing their entrepreneurial skills. Consequently, having undergone the training, it was expected that they would meet the employers' expectations to fill the job market.

In summary, as shown by the literatures, it seems that until recently, there has been no study that has employed graduates of Islamic college as their respondents. Moreover, all of the study used quantitative method in collecting their data. The current study, therefore, traces employers' views on the Islamic college graduates concerning the latter's interest in developing entrepreneurial skills, anticipation of the skills among them as well as consideration in employing them based on the skills.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of ten (10) employers of various organisations – public and private organisations as well as statutory bodies in three (3) districts in Pahang namely Kuantan, Pekan and Temerloh. Their niche areas are academic, laws, religion, banking, oil and palm. Three of them are female employers and the remaining are male employers. They were chosen as the respondents of the study since they involved directly as the head of departments of Islamic college's graduates.

Data collection

The ten (10) employers participated in the semi-structured interview. They were required to answer three (3) questions. These questions concern with their general views of the Islamic college graduates' interest in entrepenuership, opinion on whether or not the Islamic college graduates' entrepenuership interest match with the employers' expectations for the skill and finally, belief in the Islamic college graduates' ability of the skills when hiring them. Specifically, the major questions addressed in the interviews are (i) What are your opinions on the Islamic college graduates in relation to their entrepreneurial skills, (ii) In your perspectives, do their entrepreneurial skills match with your expectancies? and (iii) How do you take into account the entrepreneurial skills when hiring them?. A numerator was employed to interview all the employers. Each interview session took approximately

15 minutes and it was conducted in the employers' respective organisations. The interview took place from July, 1st until June, 24th in 2013.

Data analysis

Generally, there are four phases of collecting the data for the study. Figure 1 demonstrates the data analysis procedures employed in the study. The first phase involved organising and preparing data for analysis. The interview was transcribed manually using Microsoft Word application. Two research assistants were appointed to listen to the recordings while at the same time they were required to type the conversation between the numerator and the employers. After all interviews were typed, the document was read by the researchers. This was the second phase of the data analysis. Specifically, two researchers were responsible in reading through all the transcripts trying to immerse themselves in the data (Corti, Van, Bishop, Woollard, 2014). When reading the data, the two researchers thought and reflected of the responses given by the employers (Ryan, 2006). After the reading was done, the codification of the interview data followed. This is the third stage of the data analysis. A traditional approach was conducted to code the data whereby categories were addressed deductively and inductively from the raw data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). At this stage, the two researchers divided their roles by which one researcher would code the data and the other one would confirm the coding. At the final phase, both researchers generated a description of themes which was based on the descriptions obtained from the respondents. This called for their comprehension on the background and context of the rich and thick data at hands (Denzin, 1989 in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).
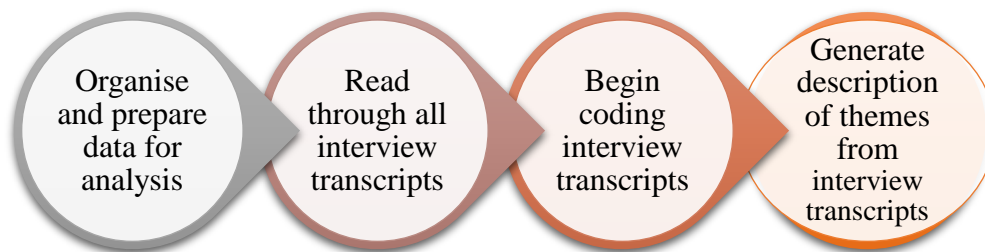

Figure 1: The data analysis procedures in the study

RESULTS

Results from the interview revealed that there was a blend of opinions when asked about the Islamic college graduates' entrepreneurial skills, whether or not their entrepreneurial skills match with the employers' expectancies and whether or not the skills were taken into account when hiring them. The employers' responses can be grouped into four themes which are entrepreneurial skills are individual interest, employee's entrepreneurial motivation, entrepreneur non-friendly practices and nil opportunity for entrepreneurship. Figure 3 illustrates the themes that emerge from the findings.

Figure 2 : The themes emerge from the findings of the study

In discussing the first theme, entrepreneurial skills are individual interest, Employer 7 argued that the interest to involve in entrepreneurship rest on the graduates themselves. He asserted: *"If you were to ask about entrepreneurial skills of the Islamic college graduates, I believe that involving in the field is up to themselves".* He added that entrepreneurial skills were added values viewing that the nature of the organisation in which the graduate was employed did not require such skills. He said, *"... having entrepreneurial skills may add value to your ability in doing your jobs. But here, as a religious officer, honesty, sincerity is more important [than the skills]".* Nevertheless, he admitted that they were employees in other departments that were involved in business. He claimed, *"... there are three to four personnels in that department [pointing to other departments in the organization] involve in business. For instance, they are some of them who sell prepaid top-up, clothes, and a lot more.*

Similarly, Employer 2 believed that graduates might be involved in any business provided that they could earn something from their interest in doing business. She remarked, *"I think that this [involving in business] is a matter of interest only. What is important, is the profit [that graduate can gain].*

Unfortunately, for Employer 9, he claimed that the interest to be entrepreneurs among the Islamic college graduates was not in them. He remarked *"… graduates should have the business spirit to become entrepreneurs."* More specifically, he mentioned, *" … I viewed that graduates today in general, and the Islamic college graduate in particular… they have less interest to be self employed"*. He reasoned that such was the case as many of them were now in their comfort zones having had the chance to work in their respective organisations. He said, *"… since they have jobs, now they feel that they are at ease".* He further commented, *" … they were not willing to take risk setting-up their own businesses. They are not willing to bear the risks and they don't want to be involved in difficulties [having had a business]".* In fact, his remarks were shared

by Employer 1 as the latter claimed, " … *the Islamic college graduate [whom is working under him] does not show the interest and talent to be entrepreneurs".*

On the other hand, there were employees who encouraged graduates to develop their entrepreneurial skills. In the theme, employee's entrepreneurial motivation, it was proved that some graduates took the opportunity to set up a business when the organisation hold a carnival. Employer 2 stated, *"...err, when we organised a carnival the other day, the graduates were responsible to manage the booth selling a few things. We encouraged them to sell something. It seemed that they were doing okay [with selling things]."* Due to this, Employer 2 considered that graduates should be given the room to develop their entrepreneurial skills since she regarded involving in business was easy. She remarked, *"Once we gave them such responsibilities [to manage booth and opportunity for business], I think they could do it... I felt that selling in this instance is easy [for graduates to venture].*

With respect to the theme, entrepreneur non-friendly practices, Employer 5 clarified that personnel who wanted to be involved in business needed to declare it as the activity was not allowed in the organisation. He explained, *"If we know that a personnel is involved in doing side income business …actually we cannot do that [involve in such nature of business]…he needs to declare the business".* Moreover, he regarded that to be entrepreneurs while working in ones organisation concerned with the employers' ethics and laws of civil servants. He commented, *" … the person [graduate] needs to declare his/her business under the ethics and rights of the civil servants".*

In the final theme; nil opportunity for entrepreneurship, Employer 4 affirmed that involving in business while working in the organisation is an offense. Therefore, the Islamic college graduate or any employer in the organisation needed to seek permission from the employer if he/she wanted to be involved in the field. He expressed, *"... involving in business [while working] in this company is an offense... if you want to conduct a business you need to get permission from the employer".*

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicated that the Islamic college graduates' interest to become entrepreneurs stemmed from their own interest. The employers believed that the interest may be developed. Yet, more importantly, they should gain benefit from their interest in doing the business. A study conducted by Rahman, Mokhtar and Hamzah (2011) revealed that imparting entrepreneurial skills required a careful plan within the curriculum to ensure its success. Moreover, the college administrators should provide avenue for the graduates as this is one of the skills that are sought by the employers (O'Regan, 2010).

In assuming the entrepreneurial skills match with their expectancies, the employers' believed that the skills depend on the nature of the organisations. Some employers are more open in developing the skills among the graduates while some disclose the opportunity. However, the employers must not be solely blamed for their decisions. Graduates should be willing to juggle their works with their business interest if they wanted to achieve their big dreams. Running a business from home is one the many examples upon which they can develop their entrepreneurial skills (Hendy, 2014). The findings imply that academicians in the college may assist graduates in developing the interest by organising a finishing school programme before the latter graduate. In the programme, Brown and Kart (2009)

assert that graduates should be exposed with hands-on experience, specifically, in developing and defending a business plan. Their study that was conducted among graduate students and/or postdoctoral trainees of life science revealed that students' organisations can be the body to promote entrepreneurship. In their case, the body was set up to facilitate its students to become bioentrepreneurship.

Finally, it is evident from the findings that employers differ in their opinions about the entrepreneurial skills when hiring the Islamic college graduates. Possessing the skills, then, depends on the nature of the organisations' niche areas. It seemed that other soft skills elements such as moral and etchics namely honesty and sincerity, is more important in hiring them. The entrepreneurial skills, therefore, are only added value skills that they may offer to the organisations.

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