

Designing The Graduate Employability Framework in Malaysian Higher Education Using The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

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Abstract

Graduates' ability to secure a job has been regarded as a significant indicator of the efficacy of a higher education institution. Given that Malaysia's higher education system is unique, this research aims to develop a graduate employability model using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), as it is specifically tailored to Malaysia's context. Collaboration between universities, workplaces, and governments aimed to achieve a common understanding. This research aims to address five core issues related to basic emotional intelligence and soft skills, including expert agreement on the constituent elements of the framework to be designed, comparative models of employability across different countries, and the interconnections among the skills in question. Social awareness and empathy, self-control of emotions, self-improvement, moral communication, and moral values, which are essential in preparing graduates for the workforce, are the five highest-ranked and most important areas resolved by consensus among the five NGT experts. This study demonstrates that NGT can develop more relevant research frameworks, particularly those that combine the emotional, social, and ethical aspects of graduate development. The approach aligns with the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education (2015-2025) and the Graduate Employability Strategic Plan (MOHE, 2021), calling for universities to more strategically align their teaching and other exploratory activities with emergent graduate employability. This article contributes to the theorisation of employability by locating the Malaysian education system in an employer's model of employability, while at the same time providing practical ways of improving graduate success and meeting educational aims.

Keywords: Graduate Employability; Nominal Group Technique (NGT); Emotional Intelligence (EQ); Soft Skills; Higher Education; Malaysia.

1. Introduction

In today's ever-changing, yet competitive global workplace, the most pressing concern for institutions of higher education worldwide is how to ensure that graduates can find a job after graduation. Different stakeholder groups, being the government, lecturers/educators, and employers, request a shift of paradigm in the higher education system that allows students' skills to flourish in value-adding and engaging conditions (in exciting and secure employment prospects). The core focus of this research is to develop essential skills, attributes, and ways of thinking that will enable students to attain sustainable and satisfying professional careers.

Graduate employability is a serious problem in Malaysia. Higher education continues to rise but concerns over graduates' employability and employers' satisfaction persist. Given the complex educational environment in Malaysia, a strong foundation will be built on its education system by developing robust systems that define what it means to be employable as a graduate in Malaysia. In the development of higher education policies, such as the development and alignment of MQF, SOs with graduate learning outcome statements in Malaysian Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015–2025 (Lee et al., 2023), or even with employment edge from courses evaluated from graduate outcomes from the Ministry of Higher Education reports, both should be aligned with this worldwide educational trend that they also need to be technology savvy, realize the importance of lifelong learning and prepare themselves to meet up-to-the-vise economic



order. Despite this, most current ideas on graduate employability are derived from Western countries and may not take into consideration the local culture, education system, and Malaysian policy.

Studies on soft skills, emotional intelligence (EQ), and readiness for graduates' employment in Malaysia have been undertaken. However, there is a limited study conducted on such type of research among experts coming from various sectors, including education, industry, and government will be used to develop the most suitable framework that suits Malaysia's employment market. Therefore, this study is important for cross-disciplinary research to get experts and employers from various disciplines to agree on the skills and qualities that graduates in Malaysia need in order to succeed in the employment market. As a result, this research was carried out to develop a Graduate Employability Framework for Malaysian higher education. Adopting the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) allowed the study to equitably and inclusively bring participants to an agreement. In this way, the developed framework would be grounded on actual sentiments of various segments that align with national education policies and assist universities in improving their graduates' success.

The current study aimed to contribute value in terms of theoretical and practical approaches by constructing a framework that incorporates stakeholders' perspectives and respects the local context in Malaysia. Theoretically, the findings of the study may also serve to broaden how employability is perceived within higher education in Malaysia. Considering practical implications, this research can give higher education institutions some guidance on integrating employability competencies into curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and strategies at the institutional level. Finally, the study's results may assist Malaysian universities and other higher education systems in Southeast Asia to improve their graduates' employability.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing graduate employability

Graduate employability has shifted from a limited emphasis on merely obtaining first jobs to a wider ability to acquire, maintain, and adjust to work in progressively changing labor market environments (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Current academic discourse views employability as a multifaceted concept that includes various skills, personal qualities, and adaptive behaviors that aid graduates in preparing for and successfully engaging with the job market (Römgens, Scoupe, & Beausaert, 2020). In the Malaysian context, graduate employability refers to graduates' capability to satisfy employer demands, secure productive jobs, and stay employable despite continual technological and economic changes (MOHE, 2023).

Research consistently underscores a continual disconnect between university programs and job market demands, suggesting that having a degree on its own is no longer adequate for job preparedness (Abdullah et al., 2024; Basir, Alias, & Hassan, 2022). Initial theoretical frameworks characterized employability as a psycho-social concept, incorporating personal adaptability, career identity, and individual assets (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). This viewpoint was subsequently broadened to encompass values, attitudes, and ethical accountability as essential components of employability in higher education settings (Yorke, 2006). These foundational theories still influence modern employability frameworks and stay very pertinent when placed within the context of national education systems and policy situations.

2.2. Emotional intelligence (EQ), soft skills, and employability

Multiple studies indicate that employment readiness and career advancement are associated with emotional intelligence (EQ) and soft skills. The abilities that represent EQ include self-awareness, emotional regulation, self-motivation, empathy, as well as effective interpersonal skills, which to sustain relationships (Goleman, 1995). In the case of Malaysia, studies have shown that students' adaptability is a dependent variable affected by their EQ (Othman, Adnan & Quah, 2023). For instance, Hafit et al. (2024) have found that EQ, as well as self-directed learning, is a significant predictor in determining students' academic performance in Malaysian higher education.

Employer satisfaction also ties to soft skills such as communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. In the Malaysian technology industry, one is employed based on soft skills such as effective interpersonal skills, ability to lead, and working together (Saad Fadhil, Ismail, & Alnoor, 2021). The expectation mismatch employers have, when compared to the soft skills possessed by graduates, was identified through a soft skills review (Vera et al., 2022). Therefore, the approach taken has resulted in calls to consider employability in a more holistic manner. This should certainly not be confined to just technical skills; it should include skills that can be applied in various employment situations. This is particularly pertinent in the current dynamic working environment (OECD, 2023).

2.3. Employability frameworks and higher education models

These models are conceptually robust; however, their limited consideration of collectivist values, moral responsibility, and culturally embedded ethical norms constrains their direct applicability within the Malaysian higher education context. One such model is the Understanding, Skills, Efficacy, and Metacognition (USEM) model. This model suggests that in order to become employable, graduates should already have a strong understanding of the subject, an appropriate skill set, be confidently competent, and be able to self-assess learning (Yorke & Knight, 2004). One such model is CareerEDGE, which focuses on developing career-relatedness, work experience, subject knowledge, soft skills, and emotional intelligence (Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007). While these models originated in the West, they still have relevance. Nonetheless, these frameworks may also be inappropriate under the Malaysian context as they are not well-suited to the Malaysian context, the education system, and the policies (Römgens et al., 2020). Additionally, Malaysia has a system of qualifications (MQF) and other educational plans, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint, that may not be compatible with Western models (MOHE, 2023). As a result, there is a required adaptation of these global models to fit the local context in order to cater to the market needs (Basir et al., 2022).

2.4. Employability challenges in Malaysian higher education

Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) still encounter significant challenges regarding graduate employability, especially regarding graduates' failure to fulfill employers' demands for non-technical and interpersonal skills (Abdullah et al., 2024). Empirical studies have emphasized ongoing skill degradation, including shortcomings in digital abilities, interpersonal skills, and emotional and mental preparedness for employment (MOHE, 2023; Yong & Ling, 2023). Additionally, employers have voiced concerns regarding the ability of higher

education institutions to prepare graduates with the necessary skills for the current job market requirements (Basir et al., 2022; Yong & Ling, 2023).

The swift changes linked to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) have amplified these challenges, as job markets increasingly emphasize adaptability, continuous learning, emotional resilience, and digital skills over mere technical know-how (OECD, 2023). As a result, universities are urged to reassess and restructure their curricula, teaching methods, and evaluation techniques to guarantee that graduates are sufficiently equipped for evolving and future-focused workforce settings. In this context, moral values hold a unique and culturally important role in the employability of Malaysian graduates. In terms of cultural psychology, employability involves more than just personal skills; it also includes socially accepted values such as integrity, accountability, and regard for others. The Malaysian education system strengthens moral and ethical growth through national policy frameworks and value-oriented educational customs, especially those rooted in Islamic educational principles highlighting trustworthiness (*amanah*), accountability (*tanggungjawab*), and ethical behavior (*akhlak*). These moral qualities are continually evident in employer expectations, with ethical conduct and solid moral judgment regarded as essential markers of long-term employability, professional integrity, and enduring career growth. Thus, moral values must be acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of employability, instead of a secondary characteristic, in a graduate employability framework that is culturally based and pertinent to the Malaysian situation.

2.5. Rationale for using nominal group technique (NGT)

Several stakeholders want to help students get employed. These may be universities, lecturers or educators, employers, alumni, or a professional centre of graduate employability. With respect to employment-related contextual competencies, one of the methods that can assess and facilitate consensus on such skills is the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). NGT is a consensus-building process that assists participants with an incremental approach of sharing ideas. Participants articulate and share their input, reflect individually, and successively eliminate their superficial responses (Kamarudin, 2024; Black, 2024). In the context of literature on higher education in Malaysia, the NGT is constructed such that a consensus-driven approach is adopted, and the framework reflects collectively (not an individual) what constitutes final agreement. This kind of concerted action reflects the collaborative model advocated in relation to the construction of employment-readiness models, making them more effective to implement and realistic (Usher & Stapleton, 2025).

2.6. Summary of gaps and research contribution

Although studies have been conducted on employability, EQ, and soft skills, as well as some models supporting them, significant gaps remain in the research conducted in Malaysia. The first gap is the limited frameworks that have been agreed upon by stakeholders. Second, EQ and moral or ethical skills are often missing from models for employability. Third, there is a lack of research that adapts global models to fit Malaysian universities. Fourth, previous studies utilised less consensus methods when creating these frameworks. The current study utilised NGT to develop a consensual and empirical framework applicable in the Malaysian context, thereby adding both new knowledge and practical value.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study used a Design and Development Research (DDR) method that combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a specific order to create a structured Graduate Employability Framework. This method allowed the study to use both data from real situations and opinions from experts to shape and improve the framework. In the first stage, surveys were given to employers and people with different educational backgrounds to find out the key skills that Malaysian graduates are missing.

Then, statistical analysis was done to compare what employers expect with the skills that graduates currently have. This showed that there are significant gaps in areas like leadership, communication abilities, and emotional intelligence (EQ). The second stage focused on getting expert feedback and improving the framework using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT).

Five experts were carefully chosen because of their experience in higher education institutions (HEIs), graduate employability, and human development. By combining the findings from the data with the structured input from these experts, the framework became more accurate and reliable, with a solid theoretical base and professional support. This study marks the beginning of developing a framework for graduate employability and gathering expert agreement. Although the use of NGT helped ensure the framework's content is valid through expert agreement, it has not yet been tested using quantitative methods. Future research could use techniques like Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), Delphi method, or Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to investigate how the different parts of the framework relate to each other, their importance, and how reliable they are.

3.2. Nominal group technique (NGT)

Phase 2 employed NGT to identify, rank, and order items that comprised the Graduate Employability Module. This was significant as it transformed knowledgeable advice into a tangible plan that drove the development of the module content, learning outcomes, and teaching methods.

The NGT method took place in a legally presiding singular expanded session comprised of five topic experts. The topics covered were education and post-graduate employability in Malaysia, which directly pertained to every expert session. The selection of experts was based on their academic qualifications, specialist fields, and professional experience. This group includes four educators from higher learning institutions and one senior professional from the industry. Collectively, they have considerable competence in information and communication technologies, project administration, community service, applied statistics, employment market, pedagogy, and Islamic educational methodology, as well as other relevant fields. Besides education, professional status was measured as a doctorate or equivalent. Zulkifli et al. (2023) claimed that to possess such qualities allows experts to render logically defensible determinations based on theory and practicality, and experience. This perspective is also shared by Berliner (2004) and Nurulrabiah Mat Noh (2020), who argue that it takes a minimum of five years of engagement in a particular domain to become proficient, and this is also consistent with the experience of these participants. The experts' theoretical frameworks were bolstered by 5-20 years of professional experience, which led to the detailed elaboration of the session.

During the NGT meeting, each expert gave ideas of competencies, skills, and values that are needed to be included in the employability module. These were based on their extensive exposure and 11 years of experience in teaching and recruitment, which has a great deal to do with graduating students and the industry. All experts had the chance to give input, and the expert who hosted would write all thoughts down clearly for added exposure. This created a state of equilibrium and prevented the session from being dominated by any one expert. The team clarified and merged overlapping ideas and thoughts between all experts, whereby all members obtained a common understanding of the constituting categories, which made up the stage of clarification. Once they have reached a consensus about the meaning of each item, the members vote and rate on a scale from 1 to 7 the extent to which they believe an idea would be useful in helping graduates to secure in the job market. This allowed for the identification of a list of crucial competencies that the group considered foundational aspects that are important in getting a job easily, specifically: emotional intelligence; communication; collaboration; digital literacy and ICT competence; leadership, ethics, adaptability, and flexibility. It was found that the approach of balancing ideas with a pre-designed ranking approach, as suggested by NGT, enabled bringing up group opinion rather than individual opinion (Black, 2024; Kamarudin, 2024). Those rated skills were, in turn, clustered into four broad domains: personal skills, social skills, emotional and thinking skills. This cluster illustrates that employability covers a wide range of skills and lays the groundwork for incorporating soft skills and EQ into university courses and curriculum. The consensus at the session of the NGT was a good and pragmatic point from which to develop the Malaysian Graduate Employability Module. It combined real-world data with expert opinions to come up with an answer that is both practical and supported by theory.

3.3. Nominal group technique (NGT) process

As outlined by Delbecq et al. (1975) and refined by Sample (1984), the NGT process used in this study included six steps. This is a structured process for people to work together to figure out, rate and rank ideas. It also ensures individual participation, and the order decisions are consistent and ordered. This is how NGT is used in higher education (Black, 2024; Kamarudin, 2024). Table 1 provides a diagram for each step of the process.

Table 1: NGT Procedural Steps

Step	Description of Activity	Duration
Step 1: Introduction to the Study	The researchers started off by addressing the focus and the scope of the aims of the research. The Session Chair, thereafter, explained the NGT approach, set the appropriate expectations, and administered the 15-minute session as a Q&A, ensuring that the aims of the session and the structure of the session were well understood by everyone.	15 minutes
Step 2: Silent Generation of Ideas	The experts were given time to individually reflect and think about the development of the module. Each of the experts was given paper sheets and, in silence, was asked to write down brief and precise ideas. This was to promote individual and independent thinking and to stimulate creative idea generation.	15 minutes
Step 3: Idea Sharing Session	In a methodical manner, everyone was allowed to communicate a single idea, and the session chair documented all the proposals on a slide visible to the participants. Equal time was allocated for each proposal in order to provide the opportunity for further explanation and elaboration.	25–30 minutes
Step 4: Group Discussion and Clarification	Then, the moderator reviewed each idea succinctly, and each of the group members discussed, synthesized, or refined each idea collectively and ensured comprehension. They were guided to provide constructive and respectful critique. Similar or repetitive ideas were merged with the consensus of all participants.	20–30 minutes
Step 5: Voting and Ranking Phase	Subsequently, participants selected and prioritized the ideas they deemed most crucial for the module. They voted using NGT Plus software, which significantly streamlined the process and provided instant feedback on the order of the ideas and the percentage each idea received. As noted by Laenen (2015), full NGT sessions typically consume 60 to 75 minutes.	60–75 minutes
Step 6: Presentation of Final Results	After the voting process, the last set of ideas in order of rank was presented, and the group reviewed these ideas collectively. Once all participants were consensus, the moderator officially closed the session. The top-ranked ideas were primed for in-depth examination, which would be integrated into the module framework.	—

4. Research Question

The study aimed to explore, identify, and validate the significant factors of readiness to work among graduates in Malaysian universities through five research questions. These issues were discussed using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). NGT is an organised way to facilitate the sharing of ideas and ensures that every contributor's input is given equal value. It contributes to a consensus, ensures fairness of the result, and actually represents the collective view of participants. Suitable job skills were established in this case. The method was also advantageous to the study as it is useful in mitigating bias and guaranteeing the authenticity of the real needs of the employment market, and expert consensus was considered in developing the framework.

The research questions were interrelated and organised coherently to answer the RQs for achieving the study objectives. The first question addressed the effect of emotional and social skills on employment readiness. The second one was concerned with deconstructing the most useful components of the framework. The third studied the existing global employment models and the model required in the Malaysian employment market. The fourth stage asked experts to identify essential employment skills, link them. The fifth was a conversation on an agreed framework for real actions around learning, teaching, and university policies. Collectively, these questions contributed to an inclusive and consensual Graduate Employability Framework that applied to the Malaysian higher education system. The research questions were:

- 1) What are the main emotional intelligence and soft skills that experts agree are important for graduate employability in Malaysian universities?
- 2) How do employers, university staff, and people who work on graduate employability come to a shared agreement about what should be included in a framework for graduate employability in Malaysia?
- 3) How much do experts think current models for employability, such as USEM, CareerEDGE, and MQF outcomes, match what employers in Malaysia need?
- 4) What agreement can be reached about how to group and prioritise competencies, and how they relate to each other, in the new framework for graduate employability in Malaysia?
- 5) How can the framework for graduate employability, which is based on expert agreement, be used to shape course planning, teaching methods, and policies in Malaysian universities?

Table 2: Research Question

Research Question	Role of NGT and Expected Outcome
RQ1	Find and order important EQ and soft skill abilities. Agreement-based list of key job-ready qualities
RQ2	Get agreement from different groups on the framework part. Shared understanding of job-ready factors from many viewpoints
RQ3	Look at global job-ready models through expert talks. Adapted model that fits Malaysian work needs
RQ4	Choose and organize the abilities in order Structure that shows how job-ready skills are connected and ranked.
RQ5	Turn agreement into useful tools for education and policy. A real-world plan for improving courses and institutions

RQ1. What emotional intelligence and soft skills do experts agree are essential for graduate employability in Malaysian universities? This research question was asked to seek out the critical EQ and soft skills that contributed toward graduate employability in a dynamic Malaysian employment market (McMillan et al., 2016). The research used five contributions of Goleman's work to define EQ in employability, they were: a) self-awareness, b) self-control, c) motivation, d) empathy e) social skills. The components assist in learning and describing how people act in the place of work (Goleman, 1995). Other soft skills like communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability were also considered along with EQ. The competencies have been increasingly recognised in contemporary employability models and practices (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke & Knight, 2004; Römgens et al., 2020). In Malaysia, it has been found that employability skills, including soft skills, such as communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork, as well as personality traits, are particularly important from the employer's perspective when recruiting (Ting et al., 2017). Likewise, there is also evidence that associates the graduate unemployment with the attributes of graduates themselves as well as their programs, and this is about having a clear set of skills that are acceptable and recognised by all stakeholders (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014).

Meanwhile, global skills trends indicate that the demand for skills including analytical thinking, resilience, leadership, and tech-related knowledge is increasing. These skills complement EQ and soft skills that equip graduates to respond to the labour market entreaties (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023, 2025; OECD, 2023). Contemporary employability models such as CareerEDGE explicitly embed EQ as a part of career development and graduate success, implying that EQ is an integral component of employability (Dacre-Pool, 2016; Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007). Likewise, the USEM model provides the means to recognise and measure soft skills, learning, and assessment self-regulation (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

The current study aimed to generate a table of skills that receive consensus amongst all, in terms of prioritisation and the importance of skills. This list would include various elements of EQ, from self-control and empathy to the most fundamental soft skills: Communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership. These competencies match the requirements of employers in Malaysia and will equip graduates against global changes in job market demands (Ting et al., 2017; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; WEF, 2023, 2025; OECD, 2023). This agreed-upon checklist will provide the basis for the Graduate Employability Framework, introducing and helping to inform future activities on verifying and applying these skills (Dacre-Pool, 2016; Römgens et al., 2020). Thus, the NGT was an appropriate and suitable method because it employs silent exchange of ideas of different stakeholders, rounds of presenting a point of view and then clarifying it if necessary, and using voting or ranking until consensus has been reached, in which all views were given equal consideration (e.g., lists of important skills; McMillan et al., 2016). Through the integration of academics, industry, and the careers support centre, these NGT sessions in this study will develop, discuss, and rank an emotional and soft skill inventory that is vital for graduates to enhance (McMillan et al., 2016).

RQ2. How do key stakeholders reach consensus on the components of a graduate employability framework suitable for the Malaysian context?

The second research question highlighted engaging multiple stakeholders to develop a Graduate Employability Framework, with attention on the contemporary context of Malaysia's universities and its job market. The NGT is a solution to this problem because it has courageously created soundings and the momentum for negotiation, which results in finding synergy on needed problems, even among multiple fields of expertise (Kamarudin, 2024; McMillan et al., 2016). In the context of Malaysia, the industry participation for validation of student learning outcomes to create value for future employers is still crucial to ensure the relevance of the curriculum with the employers' needs (Basir, Alias, & Hassan, 2022). For example, the employers identified the most significant workplace skills as communication, flexibility in business course education, and digitalisation, while the academics outlined the delivery of instructions (Ibrahim, Mohamad & Mohamed, 2023). Conversely, university employability/career services personnel also offer pathways to bridge education and employment through recommending training programmes, internships, and graduate placement (Osman, 2025).

NGT allows experts to collaborate in making proposals, distinctions, and selections within a given structure (Black 2024). A better understanding of one another and reducing the possibility of domination is developed based on this approach (Ramly, 2025). When a group arrives at consensus due to collaborative effort, this collective implication represents a strong endorsement of a holistic model that bridges the triad of academic, professional, and personal skills needed for employability. The final framework aligned with national documents like the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, which advocates for partnerships between universities and the industry to enhance the success of graduates, and the Graduate Employability Strategic Plan (MOHE, 2021), which emphasized co-creation and collaborative efforts to address the skill gaps (MOHE, 2023). So, this initial research question enabled the study to create a framework that is appropriate for local circumstances and acceptable to the stakeholder group, who will be beneficiaries, catering for the needs of contemporary universities and the economy more generally.

RQ3. To what extent do existing employability models (USEM, CareerEDGE, and MQF outcomes) align with Malaysian employer expectations?

In this research question, we were interested in how experts view the value of the adaptability and current employability of Malaysian HEIs' frameworks. NGT was used for experts working in academia, industry, and government to express their views. These panels focused on deliberating the extent to which a global model of employability, such as USEM (Yorke & Knight, 2004) or CareerEDGE (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), compares with the skills stated in MQF and Malaysian employer expectations of graduates. The USEM model includes four core components to Understanding, Skills, Confidence, and Thinking about Learning that ultimately contribute to employability. The CareerEDGE approach is concerned with career development, work experience, knowledge, general skills, and EQ (Dacre-Pool, 2020). These models have been used extensively globally, but are grounded in Western ideas, which may not necessarily be suited to Malaysia's culture, education system, and economy (Römgens, Scoupe, & Beausaert, 2020). NGT use enables scholars to closely examine models, discuss their utility, and decide which are most relevant for Malaysian graduates (Black, 2024; Kamarudin, 2024). NGT relies on a consensus among all the different stakeholders on what needs to change or remain constant in these models. This will ensure that the new Graduate Employability Framework is strong theoretically and relevant to Malaysia's education and employment industry (MOHE, 2023). Using NGT will help identify where the existing models are underserving the new skills needed for the digital economy and post-pandemic change (OECD, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). The results of this study can help local adaptations of such models by depending on what people agree about, how congruent those models are with the culture in Malaysia, and how purposeful they are for the job market.

This stage is intended to generate a framework that will converge international best practices and what Malaysian education should be, for it to compete globally and meet local needs.

RQ4. How can employability competencies be grouped, prioritised, and structured within a consensus-based framework?

This research question formed the focus of the study. The NGT was employed to synthesise, categorise, and organise employability skills identified in earlier stages of the research since it is a technique that facilitates the experts' work together ethically or fairly to generate, discuss, and select the most significant items (Black, 2024; Kamarudin, 2024). In the context of this research, NGT sessions were attended by academics, industry, and organisation experts with an interest in graduate employability. They have also categorised the skills into meaningful areas like personal, social, emotional, and cognitive.

NGT enables the generation of rich qualitative outcomes and robust quantitative data. Respondents work together to prioritise all these skills by regarding them as the most relevant and significant for securing employment. Recent studies have indicated that techniques such as NGT are particularly strong in detecting, grouping, and validating complex educational ideas, especially when a large variety of views need to be aggregated within a clear system (Ramly, 2025; Alamer, 2023). Repeated discussions and rankings used in NGT processes showed the hierarchical nature of skills and their interconnections (Basir, Alias, & Hassan, 2022). This research provides a defined and consensus-based mind map of skills that could be used as the core elements of the Malaysian Graduate Employability Framework.

As well, this systematic method used in the current work made the base view constructed on the collective opinion of professionals, not that of one individual, which leads to more accurate and reliable results (McMillan et al., 2016). Furthermore, the grouping and ranking of the skills by NGT also provides a guide on how universities can incorporate these skills in their program as well as a guide for policymakers to develop interventions that focus on improving Malaysia's graduate employability system (Ibrahim et al., 2023; MOHE, 2023). This study, through utilising NGT to acquire expert opinion, may enhance research and inform policy work. This study also provides a well-founded hierarchy of skills that may assist in the development of curricula, allow institutions to benchmark themselves facilitate national strategies aimed at improving graduate employability.

RQ5 How can the expert-validated employability framework inform curriculum design, teaching strategies, and higher education policy in Malaysia?

This final research question sought to understand 'What is possible for participants and HEIs after moving from the agreed-upon NGT results into real-world applications?' The framework developed through expert consensus was examined as to how the identified skills might be incorporated seamlessly into teaching, curriculum, and institutional policies (Black, 2024; Kamarudin, 2024). In Malaysia's HEIs system, there is a growing realisation that employment-ready skills cannot be an add-on to the curriculum after the fact; it must be there from the beginning (Basir, Alias & Hassan, 2022). In the NGT-based framework, educators can ensure that what students are learning and being tested on in class reflects the skills viewed as being most critical by experts. It is essential that specific skills which students can gain at a personal, social, and professional level are identified, and bridging the gap of skills defined by the employers, as Osman (2025) and Ibrahim, Mohamad & Mohamed (2023).

Such a teaching framework supports the development of experiential, problem-solving solving and reflective learning activities. These methods practice the skills that are relevant to work demands, i.e., teamwork or leading a project, and communicating effectively, and staying flexible (Dali, 2023). From a policy perspective, the framework enables universities and government sectors to assess students' employability and uphold education standards (MOHE, 2023). This is in line with the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 and Graduate Employability Strategic Plan (2021–2025) that focuses on the transformation of curriculum, industry collaborations, and employability of graduates. This framework of skills is connected to the SDGs, specifically SGD4—Quality Education – around which a universal framing of learning for employability within an inclusive education paradigm has been emphasized (OECD, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). Employing an NGT-based framework for this study not only covers a theoretical model but also allows institutions to develop and grow in a continuing cycle, so that Malaysian graduates acquire sufficient mental, emotional, and social competencies to survive in today's competitive job market.

5. Result and Discussion

5.1. Analysis of construct a: social and emotional competence

The corresponding section is dealing with the construct A: Social Awareness and Empathy, Emotional Competence, Self-fulfilment competencies, Interpersonal relationship skills, and Moral values. Specifically, the focus was on the assessment of how these components were integrated in a coherent EQ and soft skill training module, relevant to graduate employability. Developmental NGT was conducted to collect and receive the experts' agreement on the inclusion of each item. All items reached consensus through the five experts with regard to the package of structured voting, meaning that all such items were considered relevant for graduate employability.

Table 3: NGT Results for Construct A: Emotional and Social Competence

Items / Elements	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	Total Item Score	Percentage (%)	Rank Priority	Voter Consensus
Social Awareness and Empathy	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Emotional Competence	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Self-Development	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Social Interaction Skills	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Moral Values	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable

5.2. Interpretation and discussion

The five indicators were all scored with full agreement and the highest marks that could be awarded (i.e., 3 points to each expert, from which scoring ranged), resulting in a total of 15 points as shown in Table 3. This implies that all experts regard these aspects as a crucial part of the graduate employability framework. Based on Laenen (2015) and Usher and Stapleton (2025), we consider that a construct that receives at least 70% of consensus votes during an NGT session is valid for addition to a framework or module. Hence, the study results confirmed that the five components were important and appropriate for the theoretical module.

This research employed the NGT method for the fair identification and prioritisation of constructs, so that no bias is exerted or influenced by a small number of participants. The experts provided their opinions independently before discussing and ranking them (Delbecq et al., 1975; Kamarudin, 2024). Each expert rated each item in terms of how much she agreed with it, using a 3-point scale [1 = Disagree, 2 = Unsure, 3 = Agree]. To both items, all experts assigned the maximum score (3), showing strong agreement and validity of the elements.

In conceptual terms, the facet-level measures in Construct A are also accorded with prior understandings of dimensions of both EQ and moral development that contribute to employability. Social Awareness and Empathy facilitate interpersonal comprehension and teamwork, which represent the bridge to employment success (Robles, 2022; Dali, 2023). Emotional competence helps graduates to manage stress, solve conflicts, and adapt to work settings, which are highly regarded by employers (Saad Fadhil et al., 2021). Self-growth involves lifelong learning and self-discipline, as these are debated with Malaysia's Graduate Employability Strategic Plan (MOHE, 2023), emphasising continuous development. Interpersonal Skills for Social Interaction encourage communication and cooperation, and Moral Values are the basic needs to be honest and dependable in a work situation. Both the incorporation of moral and emotional elements in higher education have been found in earlier studies (Mohd Azri et al., 2019; Zulkifli et al., 2023) to be more responsive towards creating students who can compete in the global labour market.

On the whole, the study experts accepted Construct A, and experts believe all these items are essential for emotional and social skills, which provided a sound base to design employability programmes. This is beneficial for the career and personal success of graduates. The findings showed that the NGT technique can also be used to solicit expert opinion for a policy framework and highlight the importance of integrating EQ and moral education into undergraduate programmes.

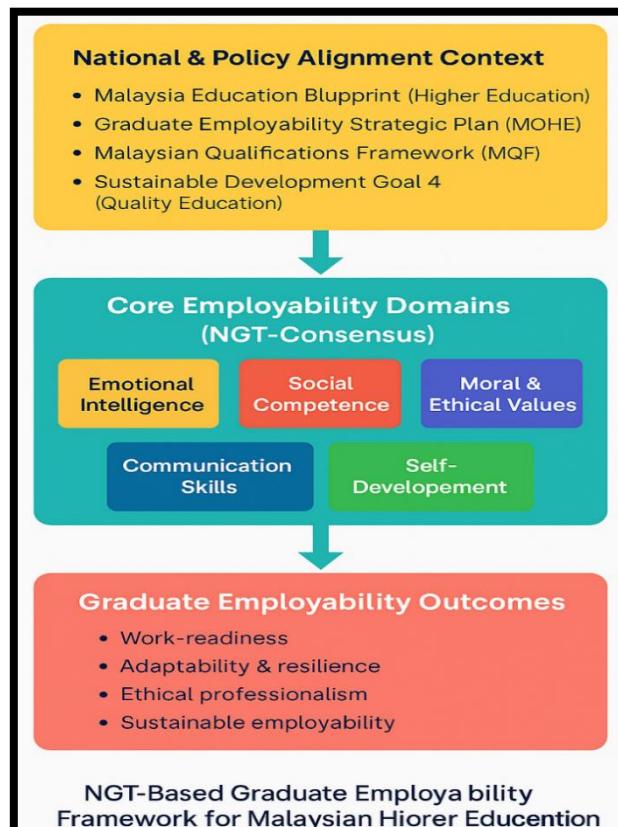


Fig. 1: NGT-Based Graduate Employability Framework for Malaysian Higher Education.

Figure 1 displays the completed Graduate Employability Framework created via expert agreement utilizing the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). The framework incorporates emotional intelligence, social skills, ethical values, communication abilities, and personal development as key employability areas, consistent with national higher education directives such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education), the Graduate Employability Strategic Plan, Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) results, and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

The suggested framework is organized in a hierarchical manner, where emotional intelligence and moral values serve as core competencies that influence graduates' attitudes, ethical decision-making, and self-regulation. These essential components facilitate the successful cultivation of social skills and communication abilities, which enhance interpersonal interactions, collaboration, and involvement in the workplace. Self-improvement skills, such as flexibility and continuous learning, function as cohesive factors that maintain employment potential over the long term. Together, these related areas lead to advanced employability results like job readiness, ethical professionalism, and long-term employability.

6. Implications, Recommendations, and Future Research

6.1. Practical implications

The findings of this study are relevant to the Malaysian educational policy makers, lecturers, and practitioners in higher education. Applying the NGT practice, one of the outputs of such a study is the Graduate Employability Framework, providing direction on how students can be work-ready. Universities can benefit from this list by mapping EQ and perceived related soft skills, and other relevant skills into their courses, as this will offer a similar augmentation, validating compliance with the MQF frameworks and the Graduate Employability Strategic Plan 2021–2025. Moreover, it helps graduates to develop courses that promote the utility, cooperation, and provide skills such as being adaptive, communicative, and ethical, which are necessary for a current place of work (Basir et al., 2022). This makes it clear to an employer the integration of higher learning education and what industries are needed. This convergence offers employability centres more tangible routes into co-developing curricula and real-world applied learning experiences like internship programs (Osman, 2025). This

research aligns with Malaysia's policy initiative that incorporates higher education as a critical component in developing high-level human resource capabilities. This educational growth also fulfils Malaysia's Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 as well as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education (OECD, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).

6.2. Theoretical implications

By incorporating emotional intelligence, soft skills, and ethical reasoning, this research extends the literature on employability. Previous models, such as CareerEDGE and USEM, were helpful but failed to include the Malaysian local context in terms of culture, belief, and values due to being developed in Western countries. This is where the NGT method comes in, which enables experts to work collectively while these global frameworks have been further developed, thus expanding the theory by applying a new approach to the Malaysian context. The NGT technique is important because it provides a process for collaborative development of contextual frameworks that may be useful in overcoming the limitations of other studies. Furthermore, the research demonstrates how emotional, social, and cognitive aspects work together to help students secure employment, something which contrasts with other scholars who have emphasised a more holistic approach (the ideal graduate) within their analysis of the whole student experience.

6.3. Policy recommendations

Several policy recommendations can be drawn from the findings obtained in this study. There are two main points for consideration hereon. Firstly, to integrate employability development as part of the strategic agenda within HEIs, together with the KPIs framed through program accreditation and teaching quality standards (MOHE, 2023). Secondly, the curriculum must emphasise hands-on learning, project-based assessment, and digital skills to build upon soft and emotional skills revealed in this study (Ibrahim, Mohamad & Mohamed, 2023). Third, mechanisms for employer participation, including advisory groups, industry partnerships, and micro-credential programmes, need to be strengthened to ensure that the curriculum is in line with the current demands of employers in the labour market (Basir et al., 2022). Finally, at the national level, employability initiatives have to be linked with broader human development objectives like lifelong learning and innovation, as presented in the 12th Malaysia Plan and SDGs 4 (OECD, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).

6.4. Limitations and future research directions

Although the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) facilitated organised expert agreement and aided in creating a contextually relevant Graduate Employability Framework, certain limitations must be recognised. Initially, the research included a comparatively small group of experts ($n = 5$). While this sample size aligns methodologically with established NGT guidelines that prioritise expertise depth over statistical representation (Delbecq et al., 1975; McMillan et al., 2016), it could restrict wider generalisability. The participants were intentionally chosen to guarantee a range of professional roles and viewpoints, incorporating higher education scholars, employability professionals, and an industry representative, with work experience spanning from 5 to more than 20 years in higher education, workforce development, and graduate hiring. This variety bolstered the reliability of the consensus results; however, future research could gain from incorporating a broader and more geographically varied expert panel to improve representativeness further.

Secondly, while NGT is useful for creating structured qualitative consensus and determining content validity, the current framework has not been quantitatively validated. Future studies are thus advised to utilize additional techniques like the Fuzzy Delphi Method, Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), or Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to explore constructing weighting, reliability, and structural connections among employability domains (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Alamer, 2023).

For practical application, future research should examine the pilot implementation of the suggested framework in chosen Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) to evaluate its viability and efficacy in actual teaching and learning environments. These pilot studies might incorporate the framework into employability modules or specific courses and assess student involvement, skills enhancement, and perceived preparedness for work. Moreover, it is suggested that longitudinal studies be conducted to monitor graduates' employment results over time, encompassing job acquisition, career advancement, flexibility, and ethical behavior in their profession, in order to evaluate the lasting effects of emotional intelligence, moral principles, and soft skills on enduring employability.

Additional research could also conduct comparative analyses of ASEAN higher education systems to explore contextual similarities and differences in employability expectations, cultural values, and policy priorities. These comparisons would assist in assessing the framework's transferability and adaptability outside the Malaysian context. Ultimately, considering the increasing use of micro-credentials and digital skills badges in higher education, forthcoming research could investigate how the framework might be reshaped into modular, stackable credentialing systems to facilitate adaptable, lifelong employability growth in sync with changing labor market needs.

6.5. Concluding implications

This research evolved from the design of frameworks towards steering sustainable transitions, pertaining to Malaysian HEIs. Developed using the NGT approach and with key influences from US-based AAC&U, the Framework articulates and equips us to ensure students' learning is in line with what future employers need. This helps enhance the rationality of decision-making and the high quality of course implementation. With the addition of social consciousness, emotional intelligence and value ethics within its curriculum, Malaysia can prepare its working age population with the skill set required to adapt in a global marketplace but at the same time maintaining the global ethical, social and moral values framework it supports both domestically as well as internationally (MOHE, 2023; OECD, 2023; WEF, 2025).

7. Conclusion

By utilising the NGT technique for building consensus among different areas of employability by experts in the field, the study developed a Graduate Employability framework for Malaysian HEIs. The study identified the most significant EQ and soft skills from inputs provided by a range of stakeholders using five main questions, tested the appropriateness of existing global models to the Malaysian employment environment, as well as clarified what the skills are. The results indicated consensus about the significance of some social and emotional skills, including empathy, moral values, self-improvement and development, and communication, as the basics for being ready to enter the job market. The results indicate NGT can be used as a tool to train and educate students targeted at the needs of global competitive industries

that drive towards 'employability fusion of educational expertise and international demand. This model enables higher education institutions to contribute to increased employability of their students, especially in their teaching and learning strategies, as a means of improving Malaysia's human resources base, which in turn contributes to the realisation of SDG 4 (Quality Education). The significance of this work lies in meaningfully addressing the issue, especially in Malaysian HEIs, and also in providing, for the first time, a reliable, practical mechanism based on stakeholder consensus. This is how the program equips its graduates for the increasingly fluid international job market. The results showed that experts agreed that certain social and emotional skills, such as empathy, moral values, self-improvement, and communication, are important for graduates to be employment ready. The NGT method proved effective in facilitating collaboration between individuals from education and industry, providing genuine, practical insights that align with national education objectives and global trends in employability. The framework gives universities a clear plan, particularly to include employability in their teaching, learning methods, and policies to build better human resources in Malaysia, and support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). This research adds value both by providing a new way to look at employability among Malaysian HEIs and by offering a practical, agreed-upon tool that prepares graduates for the changing, global employment market.

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