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Students Perceptions Towards Relevance of Tertiary Education

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Abstract: This research examines students' perceptions of higher education's broader benefits beyond job skills. It emphasizes societal advantages like environmental awareness, well-being, and civic engagement. Focused on 98 international business students at UiTM, it aims to understand factors affecting their self-esteem, particularly the link between academic prowess, social skills, and views on higher education's practical value. The study reveals strong ties between academic ability, social skills, and the importance ascribed to higher education, stressing the need for a holistic educational approach. It suggests future research areas to deepen understanding of tertiary education's relevance and societal impact. Additionally, it proposes ways for institutions to enhance students' appreciation of university education, fostering active engagement and community contribution. Overall, the research contributes to understanding the multifaceted significance of higher education, emphasizing the importance of considering academic and social competencies for informed decision-making and effective educational practices.

Keywords: *Perceptions, tertiary education, academic skills, social skills, marketability*

1. Introduction and Background

Many contemporary youths believe that tertiary education is inconsequential in the realm of employment since certain vocations no longer necessitate qualifications from tertiary institutions. The increasing number of jobless individuals with higher education degrees has further deepened this perception among young people, intensifying the issue. Hence, this study's primary objective is to explore young individuals' underlying perspectives regarding the significance of pursuing higher education. Due to the perception among some young people that tertiary education is insufficient and will not significantly contribute to their personal growth, particularly in the future job market, the issue of the relevance of higher education has arisen (Awang, 2023). Additionally, financial obligations have deterred certain individuals from pursuing additional education, raising concerns about the significance of obtaining a higher education (Dickler, 2021). However, education has been empirically demonstrated to assist young individuals in attaining their objectives and creating significant influences on society. Moreover, people with a higher level of education are more likely to make valuable contributions to the nation's development and generate groundbreaking ideas for the country. The younger generation must possess sufficient information and skills acquired from higher education institutions to make valuable contributions to the progress of the nation (Idris, Hassan, Ya'acob, Gill, and Awal, 2012). Furthermore, education has demonstrated its efficacy in mitigating inequality, particularly in regions with restricted higher education opportunities. Prior research has been undertaken to cast doubt on the caliber of our higher education (Prakash, 2018). However, most of them do not endeavor to investigate the perceptions of young individuals regarding postsecondary education. Is it because certain employment positions, such as those of social media influencers or grocery retailers, no longer require tertiary education qualifications? Therefore, it is imperative to conduct additional research to examine the elements that lead to this mindset. The major components of our study solution are enhancing the employability of college graduates and increasing public knowledge regarding the significance of obtaining a qualification from tertiary education. This will ensure that we can cultivate a favorable perception among students, encouraging them to persist in their academic pursuits. Consequently, this will result in a more significant influence on our tertiary education sector. By acknowledging students' perspectives on higher education, we can discern ways to enhance our future tertiary education system and foster a more knowledgeable community that will actively contribute to the nation's progress.

2. Literature Review

Students' perceptions of the relevancy of tertiary education: Tertiary is defined as both public and private universities, colleges, and university colleges that offer foundation, diploma, degree, and postgraduate

programs to students who have successfully finished their secondary education (Muniandy, Mutty, and Kandasamy, 2022). a study done in done by Ahmad & Ismail (2020), pointed out perception is viewed based on the institution's prestige and reputation. "prestige" refers to the external perception of the university (e.g., rankings and media coverage), while "reputation" pertains to internal factors (e.g., student welfare and financial stability). The findings indicate that the majority of non-academic staff highly rated both prestige (88.7%) and reputation (80.7%). A significant proportion of academic staff (73.3%) rated prestige higher than reputation (64.7%). This trend is consistent among current students, alumni, and the general public. The results suggest that respondents perceive the university's prestige more favorably than its reputation. Therefore, the study highlights the importance of enhancing internal performance aspects such as student support, community engagement, management, and financial stability to enhance the university's overall image (Ahmad & Ismail, 2020). Tertiary education refers to advanced and specialized education that individuals pursue after completing high school to further their studies in a specific profession. Tertiary education is not mandatory and offers students the opportunity to pursue advanced studies in specialized institutions such as colleges, polytechnics, and private or public universities. Individuals have the option to pursue further education either domestically or internationally, with or without financial support. Various legal authorities, such as MARA and JPA, have supported numerous undergraduate degrees, both domestically and internationally (Top Hat, 2020). There is a growing skepticism regarding the significance of higher education and its value in light of the stagnant economy and the rising cost of living. There is contention that investing four years in working one's way up is a superior option, as experience holds significant value (Dickler, 2021).

Some contend that facts indicate that the earnings of a university graduate are considerably higher than those of a high school graduate. There is a growing belief among certain individuals that tertiary education is not very significant, given that one may currently earn money in the digital realm by possessing the abilities demanded by today's industries, such as freelancing and content creation (Dickler, 2021). Is it worthwhile to invest a significant amount of money in postsecondary education only to receive a minimum-wage salary in return? Thus, in our society, individuals are inclined to seek the most efficient and effortless means of generating wealth rather than investing years in university education only to struggle to thrive in practical circumstances (Tar, 2011). Students perceive the purpose of higher education as preparing for the labor market, personal growth and enrichment, and contributing to societal development and progress. It does not explicitly mention whether students perceive tertiary education as relevant to their future careers and personal development (Brooks, Gupta, Jayadeva, & Abrahams, 2020). There's a study that investigates the commonalities and differences between master's and bachelor's students, focusing on how this impacts marketing strategies for private higher education institutions aiming to attract more master's students. Significant statistical disparities were found between master's and bachelor's students in smart classrooms, peer support, partnership, and perceived benefits. Notably, master's students show a strong preference for smart classrooms, peer support, and perceived benefits, whereas bachelor's students tend to favor partnership initiatives (Krishnaswamy, Nyepit. Leow, 2023).

Academic Skills: Academic skills are talents and habits that benefit academic pursuits. Examples of academic pursuits include learning, research, report writing, and presentations. Typically, to obtain a bachelor's degree, it is expected that you will finish all of your coursework and requirements within four years. However, probably, it may not be feasible. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's data indicate that just 58% of students who began their college education in 2012 managed to complete their degree within six years. The remaining children were either currently enrolled in school or had already discontinued their education. This is where proficiency in academic skills becomes relevant. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the functioning of your mind, particularly in academic settings, can enhance your abilities that apply to your role as a student. Each individual has an approach when it comes to studying and acquiring knowledge. As long as the students persist in improving themselves to become better students, things will not get hard at all. The duration of your educational pursuit directly correlates with the accumulation of expenses, increasing the likelihood of resorting to additional student loans to finance your education. Exceeding six years to obtain your degree may result in accumulating additional debt, making it challenging to disentangle oneself from the financial burden (Ahmad et al., 2014). Proficiency in academic skills is essential for achieving success in several educational endeavors, including studying, research, report composition, and presentations. Research has shown that the cultivation of efficient study routines has a substantial influence on academic achievement in various educational contexts and subject areas. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2001) conducted a study that showed a

direct correlation between effective study habits and improved academic performance among secondary school students. Furthermore, a study conducted by Gahir et al. (2022) revealed that memorizing and summarizing were often employed as study techniques, underscoring their significance in academic environments. Moreover, the influence of study habits on academic achievement has been noted in several settings. Barragán-Hervella et al. (2023) found a strong link between study habits and academic success among Nigerian scientific education students. Similarly, the Adolescent Student Academic Achievement Longitudinal Study (ASAP) by Sunday & Akporehwe (2022) highlighted lifestyle habits, including study habits, as key predictors of high school academic performance. These studies underscore the significant impact of study habits on academic outcomes. Further research has explored the relationship between study habits and academic performance, considering factors such as learning styles, stress levels, and cognitive control. For instance, Dubuc et al. (2019) examined how sleep deprivation and study habits affect the academic performance of medical imaging students, emphasizing the influence of external factors on study habits. They also identified a positive correlation between study habits and academic achievement, emphasizing the importance of effective study habits in reducing academic stress and enhancing performance (Tajuddin et al., 2022).

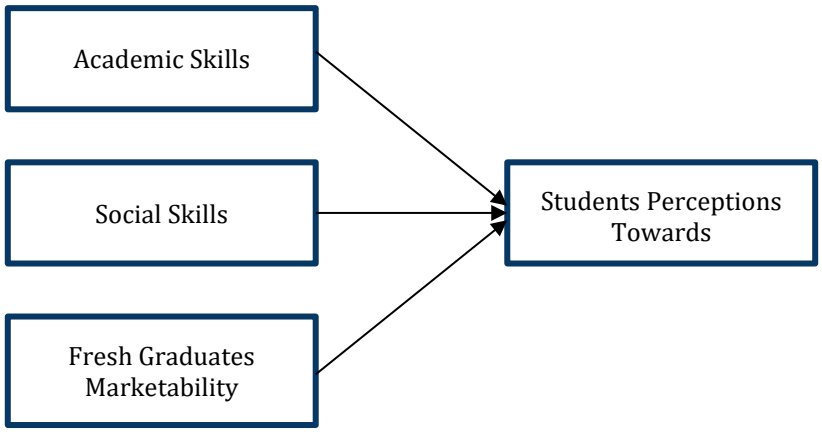
Social Skills: Social skills, also known as interpersonal skills, refer to the capacity to engage with others by employing good listening and communication techniques. Developing this skill is crucial not just for young children but also for adolescents, as it is among the most vital abilities to foster. Given that students are frequently seen as reliable indicators of forthcoming achievements, university students must focus on cultivating their social aptitudes (Kajal Sharna, 2019). There is a widely held belief that students who possess greater social skills tend to lead successful lives both personally and professionally. Universities play a crucial role in the development of social skills since students naturally assimilate them into their behavior, thereby improving their relationships with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, college graduates who acquire social skills are more adept at engaging in healthier and more successful interactions with others, thus better preparing them for life after graduation (Ahmad et al., 2014). Social skills refer to categories of social behaviors that enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes for both individuals and others, thereby contributing to successful and effective social interaction, known as social competence (Lopes, Gerolamo, Musetti, & Amaral, 2021). Recognized as essential skills for the 21st century by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2019), teaching social skills is acknowledged as a valuable approach to enhancing the quality of social interactions, particularly in the workplace. This is crucial due to the growing demand for social skills and the need for proficiency in communication to foster teamwork and collective decision-making. The author's analysis of academic and popular press documents underscores the critical importance of communication education for future personal and professional success (Lopes, Gerolamo, Musetti, & Amaral, 2021).

Marketability: Although a college degree is often depicted as a prerequisite for achieving financial prosperity, the level of competition for available job opportunities may exceed initial expectations. Securing a lucrative job post-graduation can prove to be arduous, especially in the aftermath of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, which led to a substantial increase in unemployment claims, with tens of millions of individuals seeking financial assistance. As per the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the average starting salary for college graduates who join the job directly after graduation is around $51,000. While that is a decent salary for most individuals, it is a fact that many graduates will earn less than that. If you have a significant amount of student loan debt that exceeds your salary, you may encounter challenges in meeting your financial obligations (Ahmad et al., 2021). Although a college degree is often depicted as a prerequisite for achieving financial prosperity, the level of competition for available job opportunities may exceed initial expectations. Securing a lucrative job post-graduation can prove to be arduous, especially in the wake of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, which led to millions of individuals filing for unemployment benefits. According to Bernama (2022), Malaysia has introduced five intervention initiatives to tackle the declining marketability of graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic. These initiatives include the KPT-Career Advancement Program (KPT-CAP), the Teaching Factory program, the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Transformation Program, flexible and micro-credential programs, and mobility programs. At the Education World Forum (EWF) in London, Higher Education Minister Noraini Ahmad presented the initiatives. The marketability of Malaysian graduates dropped to 84.4% in 2020 from 86.2% in 2019 due to the pandemic. The interventions aim to increase the marketability rate, achieving 85.5% by 2021. The Penjana KPT-CAP received RM150 million in funding and benefited 20,000 graduates, guaranteeing employment for at least 12 months after completion. The 'Teaching

Factory' program and TVET transformation are also part of efforts to align graduates with market demand. The National TVET Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, advises on talent requirements and technology focus to ensure the quality of higher education and graduate marketability remain intact (Bernama, 2022).

H1: There is a significant relationship between Academic Skills and Student's Perception of the Relevancy of Tertiary Education
H2: There is a significant relationship between Social Skills and Students' Perception of Relevancy of Tertiary Education
H3: There is a significant relationship between marketability and Students' Perception of Relevancy of Tertiary Education

Figure 1: research framework



Adapted from Ahmad et al., (2014) and Ahmad et al., (2021)

3. Research Methodology

The study was conducted among final-year students from the International Business program at Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Puncak Alam. Final year students have a total of 120. Referring to Sekaran and Bougie (2013), the targeted respondents for this research are 96 students. To achieve this, a non-probability sampling method was employed. Specifically, purposive sampling was chosen due to its suitability for targeting individuals with specific attributes within a smaller, more homogeneous population. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants based on predetermined criteria, ensuring relevance to the study's objectives. In this case, final-year students from the International Business program were chosen as they represent a crucial demographic for understanding pertinent issues related to tertiary education. By targeting this group, the research could delve deeper into factors influencing their academic experiences and perceptions. By employing purposive sampling and leveraging online platforms for data collection, the research could efficiently gather insights from final-year students at UiTM Puncak Alam. Subsequent analysis, including correlation coefficients and multiple regressions, enabled the identification of relationships between variables and the determination of influential factors in tertiary education. Overall, the methodological approach adopted in this study facilitated rigorous data collection and analysis, enhancing the validity and reliability of research outcomes.

4. Results

This section presents sets of results relating to the profile of respondents on students' perceptions towards tertiary education based on demographics.

Profile of Respondents: Table 1 displays a summary of the characteristics of the total sample of students who participated in the study.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Final Year students in the International Business Program at UiTM

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Males	68	69.4%
Females	30	30.6%
Total	**98**	**100%**
AGE		
19-21	17	17.3%
22-24	74	75.5%
25-27	7	7.1%
Total	**98**	**100%**
Mode of Study		
Full Time	98	100%
Total	**98**	**100%**

Correlation Analysis: A correlation matrix is used to demonstrate the strength of a linear relationship between variables in a dataset. The correlation coefficient is used to demonstrate the correlation. The correlation coefficient indicates how closely two variables are connected. Scores vary from 1 to -1. A value of one represents a perfect positive correlation, whereas a value of one represents a perfect negative correlation. Closer to zero indicates a weak association

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

	Academic Skills	Social Skills	Marketability
Perception Towards Relevance of Tertiary Education	.564*	.566**	.445**
	.000	.000	.000
	98	98	98

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The correlation results presented in Table 14 illustrate the relationship between the variables examined in the study. A correlation coefficient measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. In this analysis, several strong correlations were observed. Firstly, there is a strong positive correlation of 0.445 between students' Perceptions of the Relevance of Tertiary Education and Marketability. This indicates that as students perceive tertiary education to be more relevant, their marketability in the job market tends to increase. Secondly, there is a strong positive correlation of 0.564 between Academic Skills and Students' perceptions of Tertiary Education. This suggests that students who possess strong academic skills tend to perceive tertiary education as more relevant. Thirdly, the correlation between Students' Perceptions of

the Relevance of Tertiary Education and Social Skills is 0.566, indicating a strong positive relationship between these variables. This implies that students who perceive tertiary education as relevant also tend to possess strong social skills. Overall, the Pearson correlation coefficients for all variables are close to 1, indicating strong correlations between them. This suggests that as one variable increases, the other variable tends to increase as well, or as one variable decreases, the other variable tends to decrease. These strong correlations provide valuable insights into the relationships between students' perceptions, academic skills, social skills, and marketability in the context of tertiary education.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Multiple Regressions: ANOVA was used to determine the significant relationship between academic skills, social skills, and the marketability of fresh graduates towards the relevancy of tertiary education among international business students at UiTM Puncak Alam. The ANOVA results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Coefficients

Model		**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standard Coefficients**		
		B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**
1	(Constant)	4.776	3.394		1.407	.163
	Academic Skills	.662	.212	.335	3.128	.002
	Social Skills	.707	.185	.361	3.831	.000
	Marketability	.114	.190	.062	.599	.551
R		.649				
R-square		.421				
Adjusted R-square		.403				
F		22.797				
Significance F value		.000				

Predictors: (Constant), Academic Skills, Social Skills, Marketability

Dependent Variable: Students Perception

Multiple variables are utilized in multiple regression analysis to explain variance in the dependent variable (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). In this study, multiple regression analysis has been utilized to evaluate the independent variables of social skills, academic skills, and marketability to determine the elements that affect students' perceptions of the usefulness of tertiary education. The R-square measures how much variance in the dependent variable is explained by the predictors (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). According to the data from the table above, R-square =. 421 for this investigation. This reveals that while 57.9 % of the dependent variable may be explained by other factors, 42.1 % of it may be explained by the study's independent variables, which include academic skills, social skills, and marketability. Whereas the F value is where it predicts the response of the sample. The minimum value is 1 but the study recorded F at 22.797, p>0005, which predicts it to be a good model for forecasting the sample. As a result, it indicates that the data gathered was valid and can be

accepted. The data's significance could be attributed to the extensive number of questions per variable being tested. Additionally, according to the SPSS 25 results presented in the table, the threshold of significance level is .000. As a result, it suggests that the information acquired was accurate and credible. The enormous number of questions used to examine each variable may be the cause of the data's importance. According to the data in the table, only two independent variables (social skills and academic skills) had a substantial impact on employee retention. Both variables' significant values were 0. 000 and 0.002. The standardized coefficient (beta) result shows that social skills are the strongest variable that contributed to the dependent variable with b =. 361 followed by academic skills that contributed with b =. 335. The result has shown that it supported hypotheses 1 and 2, there is a significant relationship between academic skills and social skills with the student's perceptions of the relevancy of tertiary education. Therefore, rejecting Hypothesis 3, there is a significant relationship between marketability and the student's perceptions of the relevancy of tertiary education.

Discussion

The fundamental purpose of this research is to better understand the interaction between academic skills, social skills, and marketability concerning how students view the usefulness of tertiary education in Malaysia. The study begins by underscoring the importance of tertiary education and its potential advantages, both economically and personally. It tries to explore deeper into students' perceptions of the importance of higher education. The report gives a brief description of the dependent and independent variables of the study, followed by a theoretical framework to facilitate understanding. Based on the findings, the correlation and linkages between variables were investigated. The investigation yielded strong results in line with the research aims. Hypothesis 1 (H1), which states that academic skills positively and significantly influence students' perceptions towards the relevance of tertiary education, was supported by the results. This implies that academic skills greatly influence students' impressions of higher education, particularly among final-year students of international business who see academic skills as vital for success in tertiary education. Hypothesis 2 (H2), suggesting that social skills positively and significantly influence students' perceptions towards the relevance of tertiary education, was similarly supported. This suggests that students believe postsecondary education is crucial in acquiring social skills, such as club engagement or organizational activity, as demonstrated in the Faculty of Business and Management at UiTM. However, Hypothesis 3 (H3), which argues that marketability positively and significantly influences students' perceptions of relevance to tertiary education, was rejected due to the significance value being higher than 0.005. This implies that final-year students of international business do not regard tertiary education as considerably boosting their marketability in the labor market. They favor practical experiences and supplementary skills over university rankings. The findings contradict a study by Ahmad, Ismail, Azizan, and Ariffin (2023), which suggests that tertiary education should provide more than intellectual and social skills to boost students' marketability. The study underlines the necessity for tertiary institutions to understand students' perceptions to improve the quality of education and graduates' marketability, ultimately contributing to the country's economic prosperity.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

Recommendation for Future Research: Further Exploration of Factors Influencing Perception. Future research could delve deeper into understanding the various factors that influence students' perceptions of the relevance of tertiary education. This could include factors such as cultural background, socioeconomic status, educational experiences, and personal aspirations. For comparative studies, comparative studies across different regions or countries could offer comparative insights into how contextual factors influence students' perceptions of the relevance of tertiary education. Comparing perceptions across diverse educational systems could highlight areas for improvement and best practices.

Recommendations for Tertiary Institutions: Tertiary institutions should prioritize providing comprehensive career guidance and counseling services to help students better understand the relevance of their education in the context of future employment opportunities. This includes facilitating internships, mentorship programs, and industry partnerships to bridge the gap between academia and industry. Besides that, incorporating practical skills development programs into the curriculum can enhance students' perception of tertiary education relevance. This could involve project-based learning, experiential learning

opportunities, and hands-on training to equip students with practical skills valued by employers. Other than that, Tertiary institutions should actively engage with industry stakeholders to ensure that academic programs are aligned with industry needs and expectations. Collaborative efforts with employers can help tailor curricula to address emerging skill demands and enhance graduates' marketability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into students' perceptions of the relevance of higher education. By examining the effects of various factors such as study strategies and demographics, we have gained a deeper understanding of how students perceive the value of tertiary education. The research design emphasized the intricacies of this process, highlighting the importance of considering students' perspectives when evaluating the effectiveness of higher education programs. The findings suggest that while many students view their college or university education as relevant and beneficial for their future careers, concerns about the applicability of certain coursework to their chosen field of study may arise. Educators and academic institutions need to address these concerns and continuously assess the quality and relevance of the education they provide. Furthermore, this study has contributed to filling gaps in the existing research on students' perceptions of higher education's relevance. By recognizing the importance of education in enhancing employability and competitiveness, our findings underscore the significance of investing in high-quality, relevant tertiary education programs. Looking ahead, the insights gained from this study can inform future research on the applicability of tertiary education and related areas. By strengthening the theoretical and methodological foundations in this field, we can continue to provide valuable knowledge for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders interested in improving the quality and relevance of higher education. In summary, this research has addressed various inquiries and added complexity to our understanding of students' perceptions of the value of higher education. The authors hope that these findings will contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of tertiary education for students around the world.

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