

Business Graduates' Competencies in the Eyes of Employers: An Exploratory Study in Malaysia

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There is always a gap between employers' needs and business graduate competencies. Hence, the task to bridge the gap is very necessary in order to equipped business graduates with a more competent set of skills. This study aims to empirically explore on employers' perception on important competencies in Malaysia banking industry. This second objective is to identify the actual performance of Malaysia business graduates by comparing their generic competencies according to which type of universities. A survey questionnaire was designed and administered to determine the perceptions of employers about the perceived important competencies and hiring preferences. A total of 45 questionnaires were distributed to managers of nine main local commercial banks in Malaysia in the period of six months. Response rate for this study is 71%. The gap between employer needs and graduate competencies were able identified. The actual performances of business graduates from different type of universities were also able to obtain. The findings from this study can be a significant help to the universities in producing competitive business graduates and industries at improving human capital capabilities.

Keywords: business graduates, competencies, Malaysia banking industries

JEL Codes: M12, M19

1. Introduction

Every organization is affected by the rapid change in today's fast pace and extremely competitive business environment. It had become a critical challenge for employers to attain best talent and good employment and at the same time sustain economic growth in the global era. Therefore, only graduates with better competencies will be able to meet these challenges and fit in the job market. Now, it has shown that the graduates had achieved excellent results in their qualification. But the primary concerned now is about getting a job with their certificates so that they could earn comfortable salaries to live a comfortable life. This issue has been one of the debated issues discussed among the academia in Malaysia and the practitioners. Numerous articles have been written in the Malaysian newspapers and education journals within the last few years on a common matter of grave concern; the declining quality of graduates today. There were allegations that local Malaysian graduates lack the basic skills and knowledge that they were supposedly trained in local universities and private colleges (Woo, 2006). The feedback from employers employing fresh graduates ranges from lack of communication skills (Khoo, 2001) to untested intelligence of the graduates (New Straits Times, 2003), to lack of knowledge and expertise in their own area of study. However, according to the Higher Education Minister, Malaysia graduates did not lack the talent or competency

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to be employed but it was just that some of them lacked the direction and inputs to sharpen their natural talent, interpersonal skills and abilities (Bernama, 2009).

Therefore, a study is needed to help identify employers' perception on Malaysia business graduates and the actual performance of Malaysia business graduates. Specifically the research objectives are 1) to empirically explore on employers' perception on important competencies in Malaysia banking industry, and 2) to identify the actual performance of Malaysia business graduates by comparing their generic competencies according to which type of universities. Many researchers have investigated the competencies relevant to business, science and technology graduates (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). However, most of the research done in Malaysia are for engineering graduates (Azami, 2008), manufacturing and ICT (Quah, Aizzat, Guok & Ignatius, 2009; Hazmilah, Dunn & Jones, 2008; Mustafa, Norkisme, Suradi, Ismail, Shahabuddin & Zaharim, 2008) and SMEs (Jacob, Lee & Su, 2006). There is limited published research on the perceptions of the skills or graduate competencies that employers desire of business graduates entering the workforce on banking sector.

2. Literature Review

The term of competency is used to refer to the capability or ability. It is a set of associated but different sets of behavior structured around an underlying construct which is also known as intent. Hamel & Prahalad (1994) described competency as "the collective learning in the organization, especially how to co-ordinate diverse production skills and integrate multiple streams of technologies". Competencies can be accumulated within an individual and represent a capacity to perform at some future point (Boam & Sparrow, 1992; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). Competency may be viewed as a characteristic of an individual that is casually related to job performance (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Recent research on graduate employment addresses generic competencies as skills, abilities and attributes that complement the field of specialization of employees for work performance (Mitchell, 2003).

Perception is defined as perceives or views, it also synonym with word acceptance (Liu & Gentle, 2005; Smart & Cappel, 2006) or could be best described with depicting or portraying or thinking about something (Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 2005). Furthermore, perception shows an evaluation made by persons (Choi, Kim and Lee, 2000). In addition, the information level is believed could influence their perception regarding on certain things (Abd Ghafar, 2003).

Occupational performance is "the ability to perceive, desire, recall, plan and carry out roles, routines, tasks and sub-tasks for the purpose of self-maintenance, productivity, leisure and rest to response to demands of the internal and/or external environment (Chapparo & Ranka, 1997). Similarly, Cole & Tufano (2008) define occupational performance as the physical and mental abilities that underlie skilled occupational performance.

Banking and finance industry are the backbone of the economy growth of the country. For this reason the management of banking institutions is very stringent in selecting their candidates (The Star, 2009). They required the employees that are imposes more competencies skills and are able to learn faster and work around

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teams and team members are encouraged to interact with people across functions and authority levels and the employees talk positively about the competition between teams. Knowledge, skills, and ability are the main competency that the employees in banking sector must have in order to face with stiff global competition and rapid growth of change (The Star, 2009). Those candidates that are meet the job demands in the banking industry are the graduates equipped with the readiness to meet and adapt to the paradigm shift brought about by globalization. In a recent survey conducted by the Central Bank of Malaysia, involving 312 companies, 77.6% of the respondents felt that Malaysian graduates lack the required skills to function effectively at the workplace (Kumar, Kee, & Manshor, 2009).

There are eighteen public universities, twenty private universities in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2009). In a survey conducted by Malaysian Government conducted a survey on Malaysian graduates and it was discovered that about 60,000 Malaysian graduates were unemployed due to a lack of experience, poor English, poor communication skills and because they had pursued studies irrelevant to the market place (New Straits Times, 2009). The research further mentioned that the typical unemployed graduate was female, mainly from the Malay ethnic group and from the lower income group. Most unemployed graduates had majored in business studies or information technology. A total of 81 percent of the unemployed graduates had attended public universities where the medium of instruction in many courses was the Malay Language. The Ministry of Human Resource recently reported that a large number of graduates are still jobless. According to the report, 70 percent graduates of from public universities and institutions of higher learning are still unemployed. This is in contrast with 26 percent from private institutions of higher learning and 34 percent who are foreign graduates (Suresh, 2006). Therefore, most of the employers in industry had positive perceptions towards overseas graduates (New Straits Times, 2003). In addition to that, another study was conducted on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the northern region of Malaysia found out that employers are more satisfied with oversea graduates as compared to local graduates in terms of the following generic competencies: communication skills, confidence/positive self-image, leadership/problem-solving skills and creative/innovative skills (Quah, Aizzat, Guok, & Ignatius, 2009).

The general consensus among Malaysian employers indicates that Malaysian graduates are well trained in their areas of specialization but unfortunately they lack the 'soft skills' (Nurita, Shaharudin & Aion, 2004a). Employers today are looking for graduates not only with specific skills and knowledge but with the ability to be proactive enough to see and respond to problems. In Malaysia, more employers are searching for graduates who are balanced, with good academic achievement and possessing 'soft skills' such as communication skills, problem solving skills, interpersonal skills and the ability to be flexible (Nurita, Shaharudin & Aion, 2004b).

Past research revealed that employers looked for certain skills, behaviors and attitudes in their potential employees. Many employers preferred employees who were motivated, possessed basic skills, and had satisfied higher performance standards; who could adapt through the use of creative thinking and problem solving skills, who possessed effective personal management skills, had interpersonal, negotiating and teamwork skills that made them effective work group members, and could influence others to act through leadership skills, and had individual responsibility, self management and integrity (SCANS, 1991).

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It can be said that one major benefit to employers of graduates with such competencies (like resourcefulness and innovativeness) is a better prospect in attaining business success in the workplace under conditions of increasing competitiveness (Quek & Soon, 1999). Incidentally, many graduates seem to lack such generic competencies and this makes them less marketable in employment (Minister of Education, 2000). Feedback from various employers in Malaysia also pointed invariably to the deficiencies of tertiary education in training students to meet the needs of the workplace that result in unemployment among graduates (Asma & Lim, 2000; Lee, 2000; Quek, 2000; Kanapathy, 2001). In addition to that, there is a gap between the knowledge, skills and qualities possessed by the universities' graduates and the knowledge, skills and qualities required by the graduates' prospective employers (Hesketh, 2000). Hence it is proposed that **Hypothesis 1**;

H1: There is a significant difference in perception of employers towards overall job performance of Malaysian business graduates.

Local graduates have been receiving a lot of negative comments from both employers and the press as being unable to meet the expectation of employers due to poor competencies. Among the critics that are normally being popular such as "new business graduates cannot write well, they do not speak good English" (Lim, 2002). Vasudevan (2002) highlighted the graduates' weaknesses are do not know how to communicate or express themselves are some of the criticisms hurled at local graduates. Based on these literature, it is proposed that **Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b**;

H1a: There is a significant difference in employers' in importance of generic competency and of the performance of business graduates from local public universities.

H1b: There is a significant difference in employers' in importance of generic competency and of the performance of business graduates from local private universities.

According to Gurvinder (2008), overseas graduates perceived to have a broader outlook than local graduates, thus making them more adaptable and having better ability to manage relationships, especially with the international community. Malaysian Employers Federation's (MEF) executive director, Shamsuddin Barhan confirmed the survey's findings citing that overseas graduates performed much better than local graduates. He further mentioned that as the private sector is being driven primarily by performance and productivity; overseas graduates tend to command a higher salary (New Sunday Times, 2008). Below are the hypotheses developed for this study based from the previous literatures:

H1c: There is a significant difference in employers' in importance of generic competency and of the performance of business graduates from overseas universities.

3. Research Methodology

Cross-sectional method of study was used whereby data was collected at a single point in time. Self-administered questionnaires were used as an approach to collect data. Since this is a pilot study, only 45 questionnaires were distributed to 9 main local commercial banks in Malaysia using convenience sample method. All the samples chosen for pilot test were from the same population in the actual survey (Malhotra & Birks, 1999). Data collection began in June 2010 and ends at October 2010 in five months time frame. Only 34 were returned and used in the study. The respondents are human resource managers and functional managers.

The methodology of research employed was through survey questionnaires. A survey instrument with 1-5 Likert scale and consisted of three main sections. Section A, respondents were asked to rate the level of importance of 20 competencies they attributed as important attributed for the industries. Section B, they were also asked to rate the level of performance of the business graduates demonstrated for each competency and Section C focused on respondents' profile.

The 20 competencies items used in this study were adapted from Quek (2005) which had been checked and validated. The data collected was reviewed and entered in SPSS 18.0 software for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Respondents' Profile

A total of 45 questionnaires were distributed to managers of nine main local commercial banks in Malaysia and 34 completed questionnaires were received for this study, i.e. a total of 71% response rate. Respondents' characteristics were presented in Table 1 below. Majority of the respondents are female (70.6%) and holding first degree qualification (64.7%). Majority of these managers have been working for more the 10 years with the current establishment (44.1%) and the age of over 35 years old (41.2%).

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Items	% (f)	Items	% (f)
Education level:		Gender:	
• Degree	64.7(22)	• Male	29.4 (10)
• Diploma	23.5(8)	• Female	70.6 (24)
• Others	11.8 (4)		
Length of Current Service:		Age:	
• < 1 year	8.8 (3)	• < 25	2.9 (1)
• 1–5 years	20.6 (7)	• 26–30	20.6 (7)
• 6–10 years	26.5 (9)	• 31–35	35.3 (12)
• > 10 years	44.1 (15)	• > 35	41.2 (14)

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4.2 Reliability Analysis

Table 2 presents Cronbach alpha value for each dimension used in the study. All of the Cronbach alpha values were more than 0.7 which indicate that the dimensions used for each variable are highly reliable (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006; Nunnally, 1978).

Table 2: Cronbach Alpha Value

Item	Cronbach Alpha (No. of items)
• The importance of competencies as perceived by the employers	.676 (20)
• The performance of business graduates from local universities as perceived by the employers	.973 (20)
• The performance of business graduates from local private universities as perceived by the employers	.961 (20)
• The performance of business graduates from overseas universities as perceived by the employers	.950 (20)

4.3 Comparison of Competencies Perceived as Important by Employers and Business Graduates' Performance as Perceived by Employers

Table 3 presents histogram showing employers' ranking of the competencies perceived as importance based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = unimportant and 5 = important. The histogram also showed ranking of business graduates actual performance as perceived by employers' based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = very poor and 5 = very good.

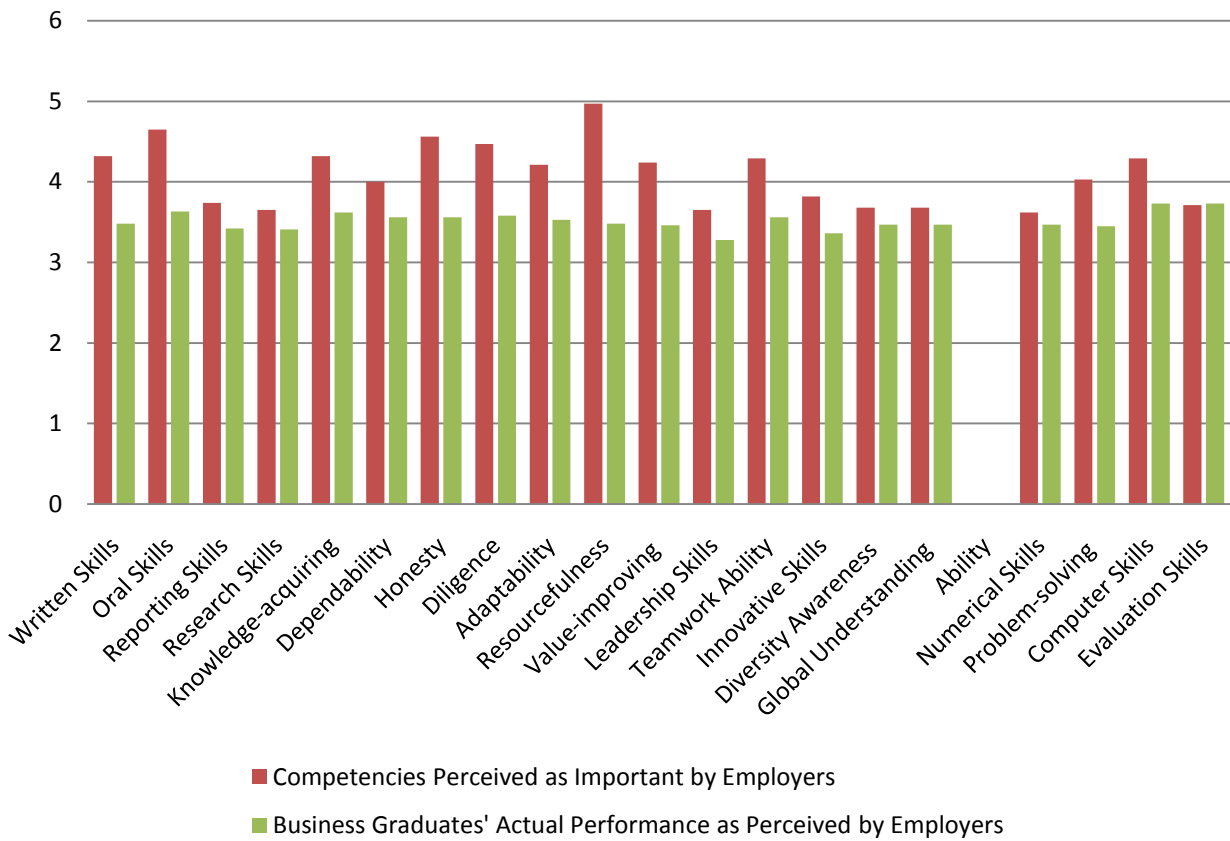
The results of comparison of competencies perceived as importance by employers and the business graduates' actual performance as perceived by employers based on mean results are shown in Table 4 and illustrated graphically in Table 3.

Employers regard resourcefulness is the most important competency, followed by oral skills, honesty, diligence, knowledge-acquiring, written skills, teamwork ability, computer skills, value-improving, adaptability, problem-solving and dependability. Interestingly, employers regards innovative skills, reporting skills, evaluating skills, global understanding, diversity awareness, research skills, leadership skills and numerical skills as neutral in their importance in the workplace today.

Employers perceived overall performance of business graduates as average based on the mean results.

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Table 3: Histogram for Comparison of Competencies Perceived as Importance by Employers and the Business Graduates' Actual Performance as Perceived by Employers



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4.4 Pair-Samples t Test Results for Differences in Importance of Competencies and Business Graduates' Performance as Perceived by Employers

Table 4: Pair-Samples t Test for Differences in Importance of Competencies and Business Graduates' Performance as Perceived by Employers

Competencies	Importance		Performance of Overall Malaysia Business Graduates		
	M	Sd	M	Sd	T
Written Skills	4.32	.589	3.48	.53303	6.528**
Oral Skills	4.65	.485	3.63	.51092	11.187**
Reporting Skills	3.74	.751	3.42	.56443	2.419**
Research Skills	3.65	.950	3.41	.55692	1.583
Knowledge-acquiring	4.32	.638	3.62	.56932	5.236**
Dependability	4.00	.888	3.56	.59016	2.752**
Honesty	4.56	.613	3.56	.62345	8.433**
Diligence	4.47	.563	3.58	.63197	7.942**
Adaptability	4.21	.687	3.53	.60368	6.285**
Resourcefulness	4.97	5.006	3.48	.55772	1.710**
Value-improving Skills	4.24	.654	3.46	.56862	5.778**
Leadership Skills	3.65	.917	3.28	.63103	2.711**
Teamwork Ability	4.29	.676	3.56	.61803	6.124**
Innovative Skills	3.82	.626	3.36	.58239	4.158**
Diversity Awareness Ability	3.68	.727	3.47	.53885	1.656
Global Understanding Ability	3.68	.727	3.47	.59242	1.955**
Numerical Skills	3.62	.652	3.47	.59242	1.256
Problem-solving Skills	4.03	.758	3.45	.58536	4.675**
Computer Skills	4.29	.760	3.73	.56539	4.050**
Evaluation Skills	3.71	.719	3.73	.57313	2.671**

Employers perceived all the items in the competencies are important for business graduates for entering the workplace but analysis showed that the overall performance of business graduates was seen as much lower than the importance managers attributed for the competencies.

Model 1 examines the difference in employers' perception of importance in generic competency and of the performance of Malaysian business graduates. Analyses showed all competencies have significant differences except research skills, diversity awareness ability and numerical skills.

This is consistent with the study done by Nicholson & Cushman (2000) which also found there is a difference in perception between industry participants and educators when ranking attributes for success in the retailing field. Our findings on the competencies perceived as important by employers supported by Jacob, Lee & Su (2006). Their findings showed that SME employers rated competencies such as computer skill (mean = 3.81), written skill (mean = 3.85), numerical skill (mean = 3.88), problem-solving skill (mean = 4.23) and teamwork ability (mean = 4.38). Archer & Davidson (2008) confirmed most employers viewed oral skills and teamwork ability are the most important capabilities sought among business graduates, with over 85% of employers regarding this as important. Next is

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numerical skill which 70% of employers think it's important. Written skills come in third with 67% of employers think it's important. Then followed by computer skills with 61% of employers regards as important. Interestingly, 49% of large companies would regard leadership important as compared to 19% as perceived by small companies.

4.5 Pair-Samples t Test Results for Differences in Importance of Competencies and Business Graduates' Performance by Types as Perceived by Employers

Analysis showed that the performance of business graduates from local public universities have the highest differences followed by business graduates from local private universities and lastly business graduates from overseas universities.

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Table 5: Pair-Samples t Test for Differences in Importance of Competencies and Business Graduates' Performance by Types of Universities as Perceived by Employers

Competencies	Importance		Performance of Local U			Performance of Local Private U			Performance of Oversea U		
	M	Sd	M	Sd	T	M	Sd	t	M	Sd	t
Written Skills	4.32	.589	2.97	.674	9.714**	3.50	.663	5.524**	3.97	.577	2.534**
Oral Skills	4.65	.485	3.09	.712	12.900**	3.65	.597	9.670**	4.15	.558	4.737**
Reporting Skills	3.74	.751	3.18	.758	3.396**	3.38	.604	2.659**	3.71	.676	.215
Research Skills	3.65	.950	3.21	.770	2.385	3.41	.609	1.542	3.62	.604	.206
Knowledge-acquiring	4.32	.638	3.47	.788	5.030**	3.59	.609	5.424**	3.79	.592	3.919**
Dependability	4.00	.888	3.35	.884	3.072**	3.59	.609	2.357**	3.74	.790	1.719
Honesty	4.56	.613	3.68	.806	6.370**	3.47	.748	7.329**	3.53	.662	8.370**
Diligence	4.47	.563	3.56	.860	6.405**	3.53	.662	7.455**	3.65	.691	6.702**
Adaptability	4.21	.687	3.32	.843	5.633**	3.47	.706	6.442**	3.79	.687	3.423**
Resourcefulness	4.97	5.006	3.24	.819	1.998	3.5	.615	1.683	3.71	.629	1.437
Value-improving Skills	4.24	.654	3.21	.808	6.005**	3.56	.660	4.680**	3.62	.604	4.623**
Leadership Skills	3.65	.917	2.91	.900	4.604**	3.38	.697	1.864	3.56	.660	.572
Teamwork Ability	4.29	.676	3.5	.788	5.480**	3.59	.743	5.152**	3.59	.743	4.924
Innovative Skills	3.82	.626	2.94	.919	5.633**	3.5	.788	2.238**	3.65	.597	1.436
Diversity Awareness Ability	3.68	.727	3.09	.866	3.470**	3.56	.613	.849	3.76	.699	-.620
Global Understanding Ability	3.68	.727	3.03	.717	4.875**	3.44	.660	1.852	3.94	.694	-2.055**
Numerical Skills	3.62	.625	3.38	.739	1.676	3.5	.663	0.892	3.53	.748	.649
Problem-solving Skills	4.03	.758	3.21	.808	4.667**	3.5	.707	3.741**	3.65	.774	3.016**
Computer Skills	4.29	.760	3.59	.701	4.723**	3.79	.687	3.137**	3.79	.641	3.253**
Evaluation Skills	3.71	.719	3.18	.834	3.323**	3.44	.660	2.055**	3.59	.657	1.000

The findings above confirmed that there is significant differences in employers' in importance of generic competency and of the performance of Malaysia business graduates and detail break down to business graduates from local public universities, local private universities and overseas universities.

As summary, model 1a examines the difference in employers' perception of importance in generic competency and of the performance of business graduates from local public universities. Analyses showed all competencies have significant differences except research skills, resourcefulness and numerical skills. Lai (2011)

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also found that employers' perceptions towards Malaysia business graduates, especially local graduates are quite satisfying even the graduates are still unable to achieve excellent level in term of the "soft skill" required. However, there are few competencies where local public graduates are not able to perform according to the employers' expectation. Findings showed that competencies such as written skills ($m = 2.97$), leadership skills ($m = 2.91$) and innovative skills ($m = 2.94$) were seen as critical area that needs special attention. Interestingly only business graduates from local private universities seems to have diversity awareness and global understanding that meet the expectations of the employers.

Model 1b examines the difference in employers' perception of importance in generic competency and of the performance of business graduates from local private universities. Analyses showed all competencies have significant differences except research skills, resourcefulness, leadership, diversity awareness, global understanding and numerical skills. Study done by Shafie & Nayan (2010) showed graduates from local private universities have the highest employability as compared to local public universities. Business graduates from overseas universities seems to have more advantages due to possess more competencies than business graduates from local public universities and local private universities such as reporting skills, dependability, teamwork, innovative and evaluation. Performance of Malaysian business graduates performance was perceived as average was supported by Lai (2011) which found employers' perception on graduates' performance are not at the terrible level. Business graduates from all types of universities seem to possess cognitive skills like numerical skills, research skills and resourcefulness that meet the expectation of employers. Our results are consistent with the study done by Lai (2011) which found that oral skill, problem solving skill, computer skill and teamwork ability are rated as important.

Model 1c examines the difference in employers' perception of importance in generic competency and of the performance of business graduates from overseas graduates. Analyses showed all competencies have significant differences except reporting skills, research skills, dependability, resourcefulness, leadership, teamwork, innovative, numerical and evaluation. Business graduates from overseas universities seems to have more advantages due to possess more competencies than business graduates from local public universities and local private universities such as reporting skills, dependability, teamwork, innovative and evaluation.

Therefore, all the hypotheses developed for this study were accepted.

5. Conclusion

The findings above confirmed that there is still a gap between the employers' perception and the actual performance of Malaysia business graduates. All the hypotheses developed for this study were accepted. The results also identified which competencies strongly possessed by Malaysia business graduates. Detailed comparisons also able to identified strengths and weaknesses of business graduates from each type of universities. As a conclusion this study contributes new finding to the issues of Malaysia business graduates competencies especially for banking sector in Malaysia. There were two limitations in the study; firstly authors only manage to conduct a pilot study on banking sector, which only consists on local

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banks. Authors may consider analyzing the perception of international banking companies on their perception towards Malaysia business graduates. Secondly, author may consider conducting the study on longitudinal basis in order to compare the perception of employers from one sector to another sector.

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