



Faculty of Applied & Creative Arts

**Effects of Creative and Technical Skills on Employability Criteria in the
Animation Industry Malaysia**

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Effects of Creative and Technical Skills on Employability Criteria in the
Animation Industry Malaysia

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

The animation industry in Malaysia is experiencing a significant growth, although research on several employability issues affecting it is still scarce, despite the growing importance of creative industries worldwide. The aim of this thesis was to investigate students' and employers' perceptions in the Malaysian animation industry regarding employability skills and other labor-related issues, including internships and portfolio building, while taking considerations on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. This study involved eight (8) senior students from the animation program in the faculty of applied and creative arts in the University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) (Malaysia) who completed their internship in their final year of study, and nine (9) employees working in the animation industry, who were selected based on the criterion of having the ability to make decisions on hiring new employees. A qualitative research methodology was adopted involving semi-structured in-depth interviews with all study participants, which data were processed via a thematic analysis. In the same time, quantitative research with the use of a close-ended questionnaire (survey) was conducted with 223 employees so as to assess the covid-19 impact. Results indicated that employability skills in the animation industry cover a wide range of creative, technical, and soft skills sets, which all converge in a manner that create a complex, dynamic and integrative professional profile. In addition, this study found that internship programs provide for advanced opportunities of acquiring real-world working experience, as well as that portfolio building is crucial for enhancing employability chances. Lastly, this study findings support the idea that the new working modes introduced due to the pandemic may benefit employees in the creative industries in terms of employability skills development. Overall, this study argues that job candidates in the animation industry must be highly skilled, creative and technologically aware in order to pursue a career. The results do suggest that both internships and universities' programs

should be sufficiently aligned to industry needs and employers' expectations.

Keywords: Animation industry, employability skills, internships, portfolio building, Covid-19.

***Kesan Kemahiran Kreatif dan Teknikal terhadap kriteria Kebolehpasaran Kerja dalam
Industri Animasi di Malaysia***

ABSTRAK

Industri animasi di Malaysia mengalami pertumbuhan yang ketara, walaupun penyelidikan mengenai beberapa isu kebolehpasaran kebolehpasaran dalam industri kreatif di seluruh dunia masih terhad, Tujuan tesis ini adalah untuk mengetahui persepsi pelajar dan majikan dalam industri animasi di Malaysia mengenai kreativiti dan kemahiran teknikal untuk kriteria kebolehpasaran dan isu berkaitan buruh lain, termasuk latihan amali dan portfolio bangunan, sambil mengambil pertimbangan tentang kesan pandemik covid-19. Kajian ini melibatkan lapan (8) pelajar senior dari program animasi di Fakulti Seni Gunaan dan Kreatif di Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) Malaysia yang menamatkan latihan amali mereka pada tahun akhir pengajian mereka, dan sembilan (9) responden yang bekerja di dalam industri animasi, yang dipilih berdasarkan kriteria iaitu mempunyai keupayaan untuk membuat keputusan mengenai pengambilan pekerja baharu. Satu penyelidikan kualitatif telah diterima pakai melibatkan temu bual separa berstruktur dengan semua kajian peserta, yang mana data telah diproses melalui analisis tematik. Dalam masa yang sama, penyelidikan kuantitatif dengan menggunakan soal selidik tertutup (tinjauan) telah dijalankan terhadap 223 orang pekerja untuk menilai kesan covid-19 terhadap industri animasi. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa kemahiran kebolehpasaran dalam industri animasi meliputi pelbagai jenis kreativiti, set teknikal dan kemahiran insaniah, dimana kesemuanya bercantum menjadi satu entiti, profil profesional yang dinamik dan integratif. Selain itu, kajian ini mendapati bahawa program latihan magang menyediakan peluang lanjutan untuk memperoleh dunia sebenar pengalaman bekerja, serta pembinaan portfolio adalah penting untuk meningkatkan peluang kebolehpasaran. Akhir sekali,

dapatan kajian ini menyokong idea bahawa kerja baru mod yang diperkenalkan akibat pandemic mungkin memberi manfaat kepada pekerja dalam industry kreatif dari segi pembangunan kemahiran kebolehpasaran. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini berpendapat bahawa pekerjaan calon dalam industry animasi mestilah dengan berkemahiran tinggi, kreatif dan sedar teknologi untuk meneruskan kerjaya. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa kedua-duanya latihan amali dan program universiti harus cukup sejajar dengan keperluan industry dan jangkaan majikan.

Kata kunci: *Industri animasi, kemahiran kebolehpasaran, latihan, pembinaan portfolio, Covid-19*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study Background

Creative industries, as crossroads of arts, culture, entrepreneurial thinking and high-end technology, are now of growing importance for the economy of many countries around the world (Abbasi et al., 2017). They involve activities that strongly rely on creativity, a wide range of skills, in-depth knowledge of the artistic domain and talent, producing intellectual property and creative content of significant economic and cultural importance (Cunningham, 2009). Driven by increasing demand for digital content, entertainment, gaming and visual effects, as well as the expanding availability of the Internet and streaming services, the animation industry has developed rapidly during the last years, displaying great market growth (Yoon, 2017). Its total value in 2018 and 2019 reached US\$259 and US\$264 billion, respectively, displaying an annual growth rate of 2-3% (Digital Vector, 2020). Although Los Angeles, Tokyo and Paris are among the top established animation hubs worldwide (Westcott, 2011), new “worlds of production” are emerging (Yoon & Malecki, 2010), leading to a more globalized production network (Yoon, 2017).

Among these, Malaysia is emerging as an animation production powerhouse, pushed by governmental support for the use of digital technology and the development of local animation content (Juhan & Ismail, 2016). Nowadays, the Malaysian animation industry displays substantial growth, with more than 372 studios being involved in various stages of production (Chong, 2018). According to Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (M₁DEC), it's worth reached in 2016 US \$187.7 million, employing over 3,000

individuals working at over 100 homegrown studios, with the latter producing more than 20 original IPs with an export value of US\$32.3 million (Aiza, 2019). Being home to a rapidly growing collection of animation studios, Malaysia strives to reach global levels in creating original animated content (Mak, 2019).

Labor within the creative industries, including the animation one, has been gaining attention due the specific particularities characterizing it (De Peuter, 2011), given that the production of creative products is embedded with hard work, deep knowledge and core aesthetic values (Legault & Weststrar, 2015). Individuals working in the creative industries should be talented, highly educated, while possessing a wide range of capabilities and generic skills (Carey et al., 2019). In addition, creating work often depends on freelancing, providing high levels of flexibility and autonomy (Bain & McLean, 2013).

Given the above, employability skills in the creative industries are of particular interest for all stakeholders involved, including employers, employees and job candidates (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). As such industries require a combination of highly specialized knowledge and generic skills, the primary focus is to be placed on the creative capacities of individuals who are able to work in this sector (Holden, 2007). In addition, employees in animation are required to have high levels of technical skills regarding the application of computer software, taking into consideration the rapid growth of animation-related technology, such as 3D software (Furniss, 2007).

As such, employees in creative industries should be technologically aware, talent driven, highly skilled and competitive, creative, while having a thorough formal and informal knowledge of their specific domain (Groenendijk et al., 2013; Carey et al., 2019).

The importance of other soft skills, though, should not be under-recognized. Such skills, being related with the contemporary modes of working, include interpersonal competencies, problem-solving, flexibility, change adaptation and personal resilience, all being in great demand by employers in the creative economy (Deming, 2017; Munro, 2017). While technical and creative skills seem to converge, increasing emphasis is placed on a combination of creativity, technical knowledge, entrepreneurial thinking, team-working and project management skills (Neff et al., 2005; Cunningham, 2009).

Furthermore, job candidates in the creative industries should be able to prove their skills, knowledge and competencies through various formal means, including their portfolio. Indeed, it has been suggested that portfolio building is a crucial component of pursuing a career in the creative sector, while in conjunction with internships, lead to advanced opportunities for better paid jobs (Scottish Funding Council 2019; Carey et al., 2019). In fact, internship programs in the creative industries play a crucial role for enhancing work readiness and employability skills (Shade & Jacobson, 2015). Although usually unpaid (Siebert & Wilson, 2013), internships constitute an avenue leading to improved opportunities for paid job positions, as they are considered as effective means of acquiring the required working competences, and support career progression by combining work experience and on-the-field learning (Daniel & Daniel, 2015).

1.2 Problem Statement

Although the animation industry represents a fast-growing industry both worldwide and in Malaysia, considerable lack of research is identified regarding its labor force and other employability-related variables, including skills and competencies that Support career development and professional progression pathways. Although working skills in the creative industries generally has been a topic of significant research interest, to the best

of our knowledge, no study has examined the particular employability skills required in the animation sector, with the empirical knowledge on this matter still being scarce and under-investigated. As such, exploring key informants views of the animation industry on employability skills is a topic of high research interest, providing a valuable insight on labor practices employed in the creative industries. Accordingly, this study investigates students and employers' perceptions regarding the employability skills in the animation Industry as well as their views their internship experiences and portfolio building, so as to provide an invaluable insight on related labor market issues. In addition, this thesis provides a preliminary assessment of employability skills development during the covid-19 pandemic.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

- i. As previously mentioned, available empirical knowledge on skills of creative workers and especially those working in the animation industry is scarce, while other elaborated topics being under-investigated. Accordingly, this study aims to fill this research gap, by investigating students and employersviews on employability skills in the animation industry, along with other employability- related issues, including the role of portfolio advantages and how can it effect the employer's decision about employment also the internships effect on the employees and students by experiencing the working environment.
- i. To identify what are the most important technical skills in the animation industry.
- ii. To identify what are the most important creative skills in the animation industry
- iii. To investigate what are the employers, employees, and graduate student's perceptions to be employed in the animation industry.

- iv. To identify what is the role of portfolio building and internship impact from participants perception to be employed in the animation industry.
- v. To investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic affected employability skills development in the animation industry.
- vi. To develop a conceptual framework regarding employability required in the animation industry.

The respective research questions include the following:

- i. Which are the most important employability skills in the animation industry, according to students and employer's views?
- ii. Which are the most important technical, creative and soft-generic (or social) skills in order to be employed in the animation industry?
- iii. How portfolio building is related to advanced employability opportunities in the animation industry?
- iv. How internships can provide for the acquisition and development of the required employability skills?
- v. What challenges students and employers in the animation industry face regarding the aforementioned issues?
- vi. How student's and employees views are differentiated in terms of their views as regards employability skills, portfolio building and internships?
- vii. How has the covid-19 pandemic affected employability skills development in the animation industry, along with other employability issues?

1.4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, which is very common in social sciences, aiming to produce information-rich data based on an interpretive and naturalistic approach of the real world, by taking into account individuals' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In qualitative research, the researcher seeks to carry out an in-depth, detailed study and understanding of the individual aspects or dimensions of the phenomenon under study, while seeking to formulate a genuine, authentic, dynamic and holistic approach (Berg, 2001). What is more, this study adopts Mason's (2017) methodological design of qualitative research, which is illustrated in the following Figure 1.1.

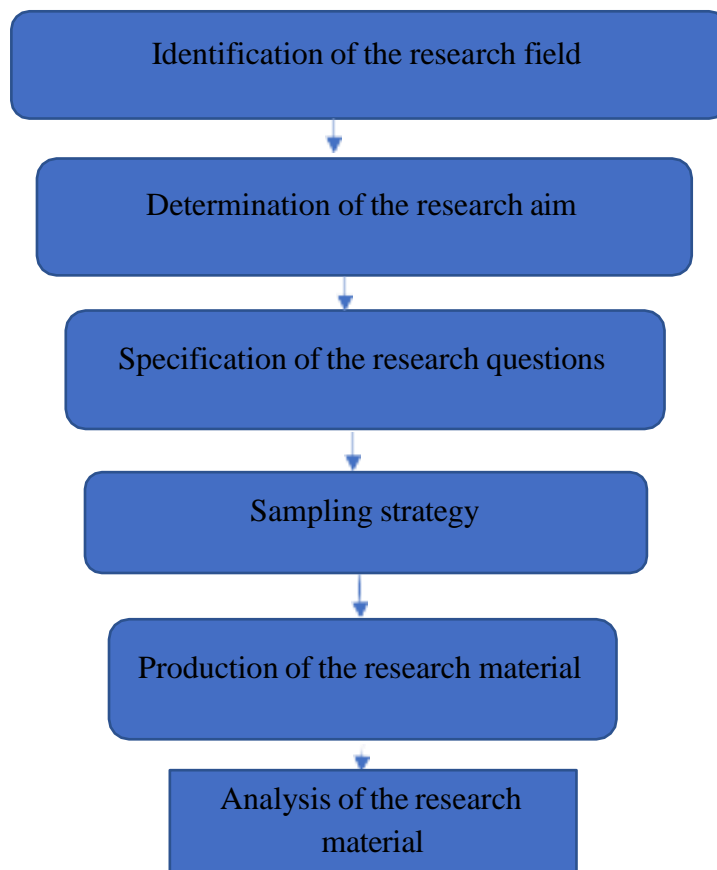


Figure 1.1: Research Design Source: Mason (2017)

Having identified the labor market in the creative (animation) industry as the research field of this study, the research aim refers to the examination of the employability skills required in this industry based on major stakeholder's views (students and employers). The respective research questions, referring to the third step of this research design paradigm, are specified according to the research aim and include employability skills and their acquisition or verification via internships and portfolio building. As for the sampling strategy, this combined a sampling of homogeneous.

Individuals and snowball sampling. A homogeneous sampling method means that individuals (students and employees) who participated in this research were selected due to having common characteristics in order to provide in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation "for example." employability in the animation industry. In addition, this sampling method was combined with a snowball sampling strategy, especially as regards employees of the animation industry, so as to reach more individuals working in the industry.

Overall, this study included: (1) eight (8) senior students from the animation program in the faculty of applied and creative arts in the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) (Malaysia) who completed their internship in their final year of study, and who held the minimum amount of industry experience and about to complete their Bachelor degree, and (2) nine (9) employees working in the animation industry, who were selected based on the criterion of having the ability to make decisions on hiring new employees based on their experience and working profile ("for example." working as an Art Director or as a Senior Animator), excluding the HR department.

Accordingly, the research material was produced via the conduction of in- depth qualitative semi-structured interviews with students and employees in the animation

industry. This strategy of data production was selected among others (“for example.” focus groups, observation, ethnography) because it allows participants to express in their own words and elaborate on their personal views and experiences in their academic, professional and working context (Barriball & While, 1994). The use of the qualitative in-depth interview is based on an ontological approach to what constitutes the social world, which perceives people's experiences, views, interpretations and interactions as important dimensions of the social reality (Baronov, 2004). This study employed a semi-structured approach for performing the in-depth interviews with the participants. The semi-structured in-depth interview consists of a set of somewhat predetermined questions and is often used by scholars in order to have a guide to the topics they consider important to cover in the interview (Mason, 2017).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and data were analyzed via a thematic analysis, a method allowing for the categorization of repetitive patterns of meaning across the data set (Clarke et al., 2015), while providing a considerable level of freedom and flexibility (Roulston, 2001). As such, the thematic content analysis was the type of method adopted for analyzing the research data, the last step of Mason's (2017) methodological design depicted in Figure 1.1. Thematic analysis is an easy-to-use method that is widely used in qualitative research. It is considered particularly important for researchers, as it provides key skills that are also useful for conducting more specialized qualitative analysis approaches (Clarke et al., 2015). In particular, it is a method of identifying, describing, reporting and “thematizing” repetitive semantic patterns, “for example.” “topics” that arise from research data, and is a key tool for all researchers involved in qualitative research (Braun and Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis in this research was conducted with the use of the program NVivo, a product of Qualitative Research Solutions (QSR) International. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) methodological process of thematic analysis, data

analysis in this study was conducted according to the research questions, leading to two broader categories of analysis: (1) student's and (2) employee's perceptions. Lastly, it should be noted that compliance with qualitative research ethics and principles was accomplished by safeguarding full participant's consent, by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and by informing participants about the research aims and objectives.

What is more, this qualitative study adopted a stakeholder analysis perspective, which is used to explore experiences, views and perceptions of individuals who are considered as having a relatively significant influence on potential outcomes. Stakeholders' analysis originated from organizational and economic sciences, so as to identify and access key group of people having an important influence on the success of a project. As an emergent methodology used both in qualitative and quantitative research, stakeholders' analysis proposes that certain individuals or groups have a power to influence scientific results and require special attention (Mitchell et al., 1997). As such, adopting a stakeholder's perspective in qualitative research required the examination of certain groups positions, which in turn interests the outcomes of a given research (Hennink et al., 2020). It should also be noted that this type of analysis can be used as a tool for engaging various groups to build respective relationships with each other. In this study, the two key stakeholders identified include students and employers (employees acting as employers due to their power on hiring new joiners), given that employability criteria are an issue of concern of the animation industry's labor market, in which both those two groups shape, with taking into account the significant evolving if both of the stakeholder's collaborated and reflected on the creative industry.

Lastly, it should be noted that for the last research question (the effect of covid-19 pandemic on employability skills development in the animation industry), qualitative research with the use of a questionnaire (survey) was conducted. The survey involved 223