

## EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATION AND SATISFACTION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING GRADUATES

**Latifah Abdol Latif**

Open University Malaysia, Malaysia  
latifah@oum.edu.my

**Thirumeni Subramaniam**

Open University Malaysia, Malaysia  
thirumeni@oum.edu.my

---

### ABSTRACT

*In this new age of globalization, human capital investment is crucial in preparing a workforce that meets the rapidly changing industry needs. There is now a critical need to re-examine the function of Open University Malaysia as a higher education provider which provides opportunities for the further re-skilling and up-skilling of people who are already employed. Open University Malaysia is able to contribute significantly to lifelong learning efforts for these working adults, however, these institutions have constantly been regarded as 'the lower quality alternative' with their flexible entry policy and flexible delivery and learning modes. This paper examines the extent to which Open University Malaysia, the country's premier ODL university trains and develops its graduates to meet employers' expectations with regard to the different types of skills required at the workplace. Printed questionnaires were sent via postal mail to employers of the December 2013 graduates of the Bachelor degree programmes. Responses of 109 out of a total of 600 (18.2%) employers were analysed using quadrant and gap analysis for four dimensions of employability skills namely, Knowledge and Understanding, General Qualities, General Skills and Specialized Skills. Quadrant analysis indicates that General Qualities fall in the strength quadrant, followed by General Skills, but to a lesser extent. Specialized Skills and Knowledge and Understanding were placed in the low priority quadrant. In the overall evaluation, 90.8% of employers were "satisfied" and "very satisfied" with employee's knowledge and skills; 59.6% indicated that general performance of the OUM graduates are "better" and "much better" compared to others and 89.0% are likely to employ graduates from OUM. The positive findings serve as evidence on the success of OUM in fulfilling its role in enhancing general qualities and skills that are synonymous to lifelong learning skills expected by employers.*

**Keywords:** *employability skills, general qualities, general skills, knowledge and understanding, specialized skills, lifelong learning, higher education, human capital development*

## INTRODUCTION

The New Economic Model in Malaysia was developed by its government as a catalyst to achieve the nation's vision of becoming a developed nation. A key strategic reform initiative is the Development of Quality Workforce (NEAC, 2009). 'The foundation of any productive high-income economy lies in a globally competitive, creative and innovative workforce' (EPU, 2010). The role of human capital in determining the wealth of nations is also emphasized by Manuelli (2015), who also suggested that the quality of human capital varies systematically with the level of development. While the concept of quality of human capital requires an inclusive definition, the need for a strategic investment in human capital and an effective and efficient plan across the entire human capital categories (Early Childhood, School Education, Tertiary Education and Lifelong Learning (LLL)) cannot be denied. The development of an efficient human capital underlines the necessity of LLL. Among the existing LLL providers in Malaysia, Open University Malaysia (OUM) stands out as the premier private LLL provider with 15 years of track record. Nevertheless, rising competitions and changes in the education market propels OUM to evaluate the quality of the human capital it generates. This requires several considerations: (i) its dual role as the provider of higher education through open and distance learning (ODL) and promotion of the LLL culture; (ii) the forces and constrains in adult education; (iii) the role of employers as an important stakeholder.

While almost all OUM learners are employed and are already in the workforce, the employability of its graduates is relevant. OUM has a strategic position and is able to actively measure the employability of its learners from their immediate employers. It is proposed that the term employability is adopted from the USEM Model proposed by Knight and Yorke (2003), which defines employability as the confluence of Understanding, Skills (both subject-specific and generic skills), Efficacy beliefs and Metacognition (types of thinking). Given OUM's multidimensional position, the close relationship between Employability and LLL is discussed in the next section, followed by methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. This paper examines the extent to which the December 2013 graduates' employability attributes are considered important and satisfactory from the employers' viewpoint. This study, as pointed out by Kirkpatrick (2005): 'Despite a long and generally successful track record, ODL is still required to prove that the quality of student learning is at least equivalent to or better than face-to-face teaching'.

## LEARNING, ODL, LLL AND EMPLOYABILITY

Developments in cognitive and brain science indicate that the learning process in human begins since birth without any formal system or language development. The discovery of different modes of learning and various learning theories suggest that learning is a cognitive process that can be nurtured not only by a formal education system, but also through an awareness of the surrounding and exploration (Advameg, Inc., 2014). The recognition of multiple modes of learning is based on individual differences and therefore emphasizes the need for an education system featuring flexibility and diversity.

The inherent capacity in human for growth and development or human potential can be nurtured. This is the core belief of the open education. This belief underlines the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) which is also used in relation to: correspondence education, continuing education, distance learning, adult education, technology-mediated education, online learning, learner-centred education, open learning, open access, flexible learning, distributed learning etc. An effective ODL system can support the realisation of human potential in all human being. Ideally, learners ought to acquire self-actualisation and LLL capacity which can lead to further exploration in other aspects of life including career.

As a higher education provider which promotes LLL through ODL, OUM understands the importance of ODL in human capital investment and development. OUM have through the years been able to identify the crucial elements of provision of higher education through ODL and its challenges. OUM explores the study of employability by finding out the level of importance and the level of satisfaction that an employer is able to identify with OUM's graduates. It focuses on four dimensions: Knowledge and Understanding, General Qualities (or Efficacy Beliefs), General Skills and Specialised Skills. The dimension of metacognition is not explored here.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a quantitative approach whereby printed survey questionnaires were sent by postal mail to employers of the December 2013 graduates. Names and postal addresses of the employers were initially sought from the graduates using an online submission of data prior to the December 2013 convocation. Stamped, self-addressed envelopes were enclosed together with the questionnaires to facilitate the return of the completed surveys.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the research findings. Importance-Satisfaction Quadrant Analysis was carried out for the four identified dimensions of competencies. Gap Analysis was also carried out with dependent samples t-tests to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses as perceived by the employers.

### Instrumentation

The items related to Importance and Satisfaction with regard to Employability competencies were largely adapted from those validated and utilized in the 2005 Noel-Levitz Employer Satisfaction Survey (Kleinke, 2006). The respondents were required to rate the level of importance on a five-point Likert-type scale (1) Not at all important; (2) Not very important; (3) Somewhat important; (4) Very important; and (5) Extremely important. Five-point Likert-type scale was also used by respondents to rate their level of satisfaction with the performance of OUM graduates.

**Table 1:** Dimension, Number of Items and Reliability of Dimensions

Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Knowledge and Understanding	7	0.88
General Qualities	14	0.97
General Skills	15	0.96
Specialized Skills	7	0.92

The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the Knowledge and Understanding, General Qualities, General Skills and Specialized Skills dimensions exceed 0.7, suggesting that as a whole the Importance-Satisfaction scale has a high internal consistency (DeVellis, 1991).

### Population and Sample

A total of 109 completed surveys were received from a random sample of 600 that was mailed to employers, giving an overall response rate 18.2% percent. The questionnaires

were only sent to students from the open-market programmes whose population is much smaller than graduates sponsored by the Ministry of Education. Hence the percentage of the sample selected through standard random sampling method is rather small. The total population of the Bachelor and Postgraduate degree students who graduated in December 2013 was 3875. The respondents were from various sectors namely Education (67), Service (13), ICT (6), Healthcare (4), Hospitality (3), Construction (3), Manufacturing (2), Business (1) and Agriculture (1). The sector for 9 out of 109 respondents was not identified. A total of 85.3 percent were from the public sector while remaining 14.7 percent were from the private sector. The respondents were from various states and federal territories in the country.

### Data Analysis

In the quadrant analysis, the overall mean for satisfaction was plotted against the overall mean for importance, for each competency dimension. Interpretation for each of the four quadrants is as follows:

- (1) If the plotted values fall in the upper right quadrant (High Importance - High Satisfaction), the items are considered *Strengths*;
- (2) If the plotted values fall in the upper left quadrant (High Importance - Low Satisfaction), the items draw attention to *Opportunities for Improvement*;
- (3) If the plotted values fall in the lower left quadrant (Low Importance - Low Satisfaction), the items are considered of *Low Priority*; and
- (4) If the plotted values fall in the lower right quadrant (Low Importance - High Satisfaction), these items are considered under *Misallocation of Resources*.

## RESULTS

### 1) DIMENSIONS

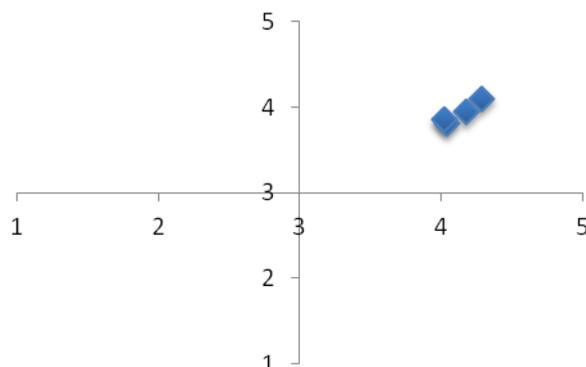
The Means and Standard Deviations for the four dimensions are shown in Table 2. The overall importance mean is 4.13 while the overall satisfaction mean is 3.93. It is noteworthy that all of the four types of skills were rated 'very important' and 'extremely important'; the highest of which is General Qualities, followed by General Skills, Specialized Skills and Knowledge and Understanding. In terms of satisfaction, the employers were 'somewhat satisfied' to 'very satisfied' with the skills of OUM graduate employees. The General Qualities dimension was accorded highest satisfaction, followed by General Skills, Knowledge and Understanding and finally Specialized Skills.

**Table 2:** Means and Standard Deviations of the Dimensions

Dimensions	Importance	SD	Satisfaction	SD
General Qualities	4.29	0.49	4.09	0.53
General Skills	4.18	0.48	3.95	0.50
Specialized skills	4.04	0.50	3.81	0.53
Knowledge/Understanding	4.02	0.52	3.86	0.52
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.13</b>		<b>3.93</b>	

## Quadrant Analysis

A visual representation of the ratings given by the employers can be seen in Figure 1 by plotting the importance means and satisfaction means in a scatter diagram, depicted in the form of a quadrant. All the four dimensions fall in the Strength Quadrant, indicating that OUM has successfully produced graduates who are well equipped with all skills identified as important, and to the satisfaction of their employers.



**Figure 1:** Quadrant analysis for the four skill dimensions

To further refine our analysis to gain deeper insights into the ratings by the employers, we reconstructed the above quadrant by using the overall means of importance (4.13) and satisfaction (3.93) as the reference points or new axis (Figure 2). This indirectly converts the absolute ratings into relative ratings based on the overall mean scores. Based on this new quadrant, the 'General Qualities' dimension falls in the strength quadrant, together with 'General Skills' (to a lesser extent). 'Specialized Skills' and 'Knowledge and Understanding' are both in the low priority quadrant.

The gap analysis was also carried out with an objective of explicitly identifying the gaps between importance and satisfaction. The gap was measured by subtracting the mean score of satisfaction from the mean score of importance. Items with large positive gaps are indicative of problem areas that need correction, as these items are not meeting employers' expectations. Small gap values imply that expectations are met, and negative gap score indicates that we have exceeded expectation. The variation between the dimensions is shown in Table 3.

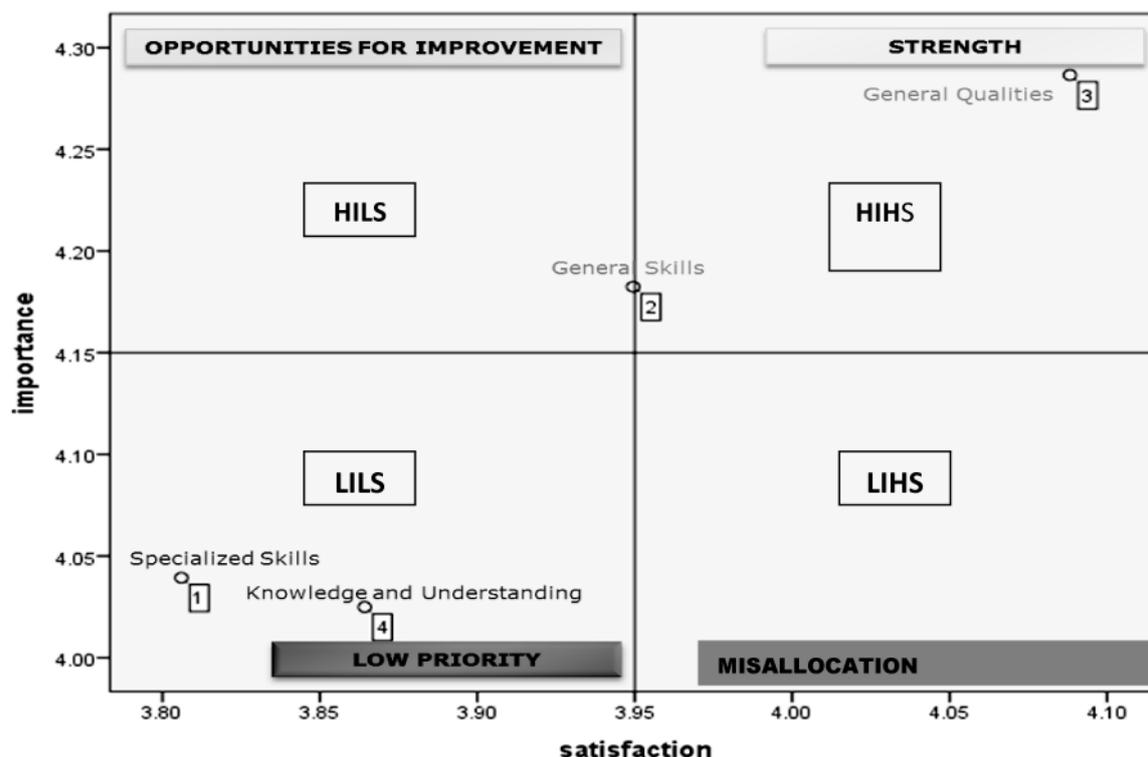


Figure 2: Relative Quadrant Analysis for Overall Dimensions

Table 3: Summary of the Overall Importance, Satisfaction, Gap and % Strengths and % Weakness by Skill Dimensions

Dimensions	Overall Importance Means	Overall Satisfaction Means	Overall Gap Means	% Strength, % Weakness
Knowledge & Understanding	4.02	3.86	0.16	42.9; 0
General qualities	4.28	4.08	0.20	85.7; 0
General skills	4.18	3.95	0.23	60.0; 13.3
Specialized skills	4.03	3.80	0.23	14.3; 0

All measured gaps are small (<0.5) indicating that the employers' expectations are satisfactorily met. Both General and Specialized Skills have the largest gap, which suggests the need to focus on **transfer of skills**. **General Qualities** which is the most important dimension also has a relatively high gap (0.2). The smallest gap is for *Knowledge and Understanding*, however this dimension is of lower importance compared to the other three dimensions.

## 2) ITEMS

The items are distributed in a similar manner to their respective quadrants, and are labeled as HIHS (high importance - high satisfaction); HILS (high importance - low satisfaction); LILS (low importance - low satisfaction) and LIHS (low importance - high satisfaction) (Table 4). Across all the four different types of skill, a majority, that is 25 out of 42 (59.5%) are high importance-high satisfaction items, followed by 14 items of the low importance-low satisfaction (low priority) quadrant. There are two items that are in the high importance-low

satisfaction (weakness), requiring attention, and they are: Presentation skill as well as Critical thinking and analytical skills.

**Table 4:** Distribution of Items by Important-Satisfaction Quadrant and Gap Scores

DIMENSIONS /ITEMS	IMP	SAT	GAP	#HIHS	#HILS	#LILS	#LIHS
Understanding of industry regulations and policies	4.07	3.8	0.27*			X	
Knowledge of specific computer applications required for job	4.08	3.83	0.25*			X	
Understanding of job-related information	4.23	4.02	<b>0.21*</b>	X			
Ability to translate theory into practice	4.14	3.93	<b>0.21*</b>	X			
Knowledge in employee's field of study	4.13	3.96	<b>0.17*</b>	X			
Specific technical knowledge required for the job	4.03	3.90	0.13			X	
Understanding of international business environment	3.56	3.57	-0.01			X	
<b>KNOWLEDGE &amp; UNDERSTANDING</b>	<b>4.03</b>	<b>3.86</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>3 (42.9)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4 (57.1)</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Professional ethics</b>	<b>4.34</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>0.28*</b>	<b>X</b>			
Creativity and innovation	4.21	3.95	<b>0.26*</b>	X			
Integrity	4.44	4.21	0.23*	X			
Self-discipline	4.43	4.2	0.23*	X			
Accepts responsibility for consequences of actions	4.25	4.03	0.22*	X			
Positive attitude towards work	4.41	4.20	0.21*	X			
Ability to reflect own performance	4.22	4.01	0.21*	X			
Self-confidence	4.38	4.18	0.20*	X			
Flexibility and adaptability (responds well to change)	4.26	4.06	0.20*	X			
Self-motivation and initiative	4.33	4.14	0.19*	X			
Empathy (understands situations and feelings of others)	4.12	3.95	0.17*				X
Willingness to learn	4.32	4.18	<b>0.14*</b>	X			
Reliability (can be depended on to complete work assignments)	4.24	4.1	<b>0.14*</b>	X			
Appreciation of different cultural contexts	4.10	3.96	0.14*				X
<b>GENERAL QUALITIES</b>	<b>4.28</b>	<b>4.08</b>	<b>0.20</b>	<b>12 (85.7)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2 (14.3)</b>
<b>Verbal communication</b>	<b>4.31</b>	<b>4.00</b>	<b>0.31*</b>	<b>X</b>			
<b>Problem solving skills</b>	<b>4.27</b>	<b>3.99</b>	<b>0.28*</b>	<b>X</b>			
<b>Written communication</b>	<b>4.22</b>	<b>3.94</b>	<b>0.28*</b>	<b>X</b>			
Presentation skills	4.15	3.88	<b>0.27*</b>		X		
Critical thinking and analytical skills	4.16	3.90	<b>0.26*</b>		X		

Listening to others	4.28	4.03	0.25*	X			
Customer service	4.17	3.95	0.22*	X			
Decision making skills	4.16	3.94	0.22*	X			
Leadership skills	4.11	3.89	0.22*			X	
Use of equipment or technology specific to the job	4.08	3.86	0.22*			X	
Management of resources	4.03	3.83	0.20*			X	
Ability to find and access information	4.24	4.06	0.18*	X			
Teamwork	4.30	4.15	0.15*	X			
Basic computer	4.20	4.06	0.14*	X			
Entrepreneurial skills	3.97	3.77	0.20*			X	
<b>GENERAL SKILLS</b>	<b>4.18</b>	<b>3.95</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>9</b> <b>(60.0)</b>	<b>2</b> <b>(13.3)</b>	<b>4</b> <b>(26.7)</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Fluency in English</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>3.63</b>	<b>0.41*</b>			<b>X</b>	
Ability to set goals and allocate time to achieve them	4.17	3.92	0.25*	X			
Mentoring or coaching colleagues	4.09	3.84	0.25*			X	
Management of organizational resources	4.06	3.89	0.17*			X	
Project management	3.83	3.67	0.16*			X	
Negotiation	3.96	3.81	0.15*			X	
<b>SPECIALIZED SKILLS</b>	<b>4.03</b>	<b>3.79</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>1</b> <b>(16.7)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b> <b>(83.3)</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>4.13</b>	<b>3.92</b>	<b>0.21</b>				

\*Significant at 5% confidence level.

# Refer to the Importance-Satisfaction Quadrant in Figure 2.

**Knowledge and Understanding:** the difference between the importance and satisfaction mean scores is significant for five (5) out of the seven (7) items. The two items in which the differences are not significant are: *Understanding of international business environment and Specific technical knowledge required for the job*. 57.1% of the items are under the low priority/overkill quadrant, while 42.9% represents the strength. **Knowledge in employee's field of study** which is a HIHS item represents OUM's selling point in that it has produced graduates who satisfy employer's important skill requirements and at a high level of satisfaction. While, the overall gap for this dimension is relatively low, there are items of significantly high gap and require improvement.

**General Qualities:** The gap scores for all the 14 items in this dimension are significant. 60.0% are HIHS (strength) items and 13.3% are weakness items, with the rest as low importance/overkill. For this dimension, the institution has done well in equipping its graduates with the following skills: **Willingness to learn** and **Reliability (can be depended on to complete work assignments)**. These two items also represent OUM's selling points.

**General Skills:** The gap scores for all fifteen (15) items are significant, and nine (9) items are in the HIHS quadrant, two (2) in the HILS quadrant, and the remaining six (6) in the LILS quadrant. **Ability to find and access information; Teamwork and Basic computer skills** are areas where OUM has done very well with relatively low gaps.

**Specialized Skills:** The difference between the importance and satisfaction for all items in this dimension is all significant. Only one (1) is in the HIHS quadrant, and five (5) other items are in the LILS quadrant. **Ability to set goals and allocate time to achieve them** is a strength item, however, a gap score slightly higher than the overall average gap score indicates that there is ample room for improvement in this aspect.

### Items with Top 5 Highest Importance-Satisfaction Gap Scores

Skill items with top five (5) gap scores were identified based on the magnitude and percentage of their importance-satisfaction gaps. This is shown in Table 5 in descending order.

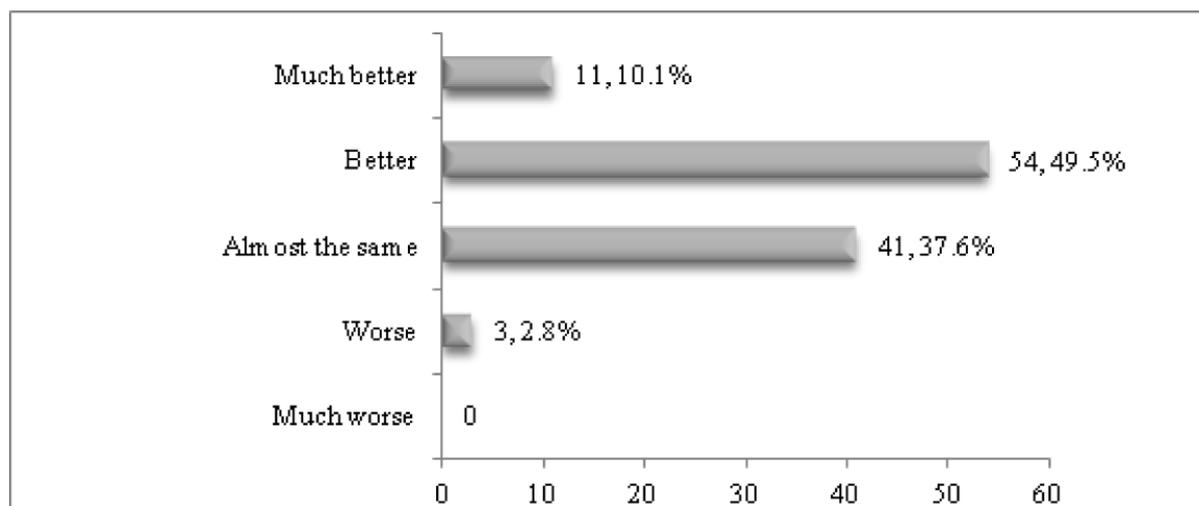
**Table 5:** Top Five Highest Gaps in the Skill Items in All Four Dimensions

Items	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	% GAP
Fluency in English	4.04	3.63	0.41	8.2%
Verbal communication	4.31	4.00	0.31	6.2%
Professional ethics	4.34	4.06	0.28	5.6%
Written communication	4.22	3.94	0.28	5.6%
Problem solving skills	4.27	3.99	0.28	5.6%

There is certainly a need to introduce measures to reduce the gaps in: Fluency in English (0.41), Verbal communication (0.31), Professional ethics (0.28), Written communication (0.28) and Problem-solving skills (0.28).

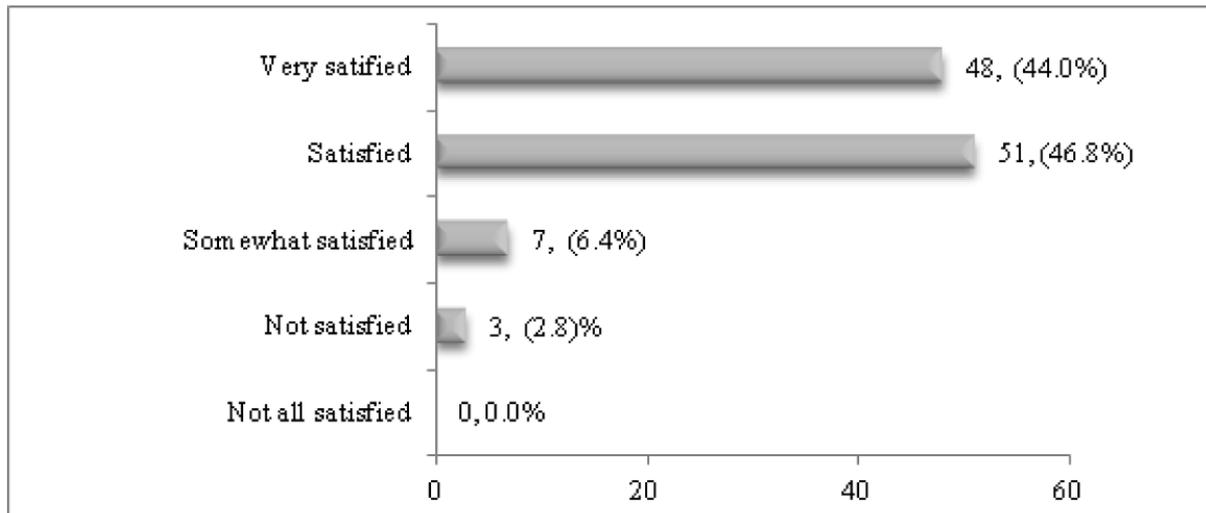
### Overall Satisfaction

Analysis of data obtained from general feedback questions at the end of the survey revealed that 10.1 percent of the employers were of the opinion that OUM graduates were much better than new graduates from other universities while 49.5 percent thought OUM graduates were better (see Figure 3). This gives a total of 59.6 percent agreement that OUM graduates were better than those from other universities. Meanwhile, 37.6 percent found OUM graduates to be almost the same as the others, thus giving an overall satisfaction rate of 97.2 percent. Only 2.8 percent found them to be worse and none thought that OUM graduates were much worse than new graduates from other universities.



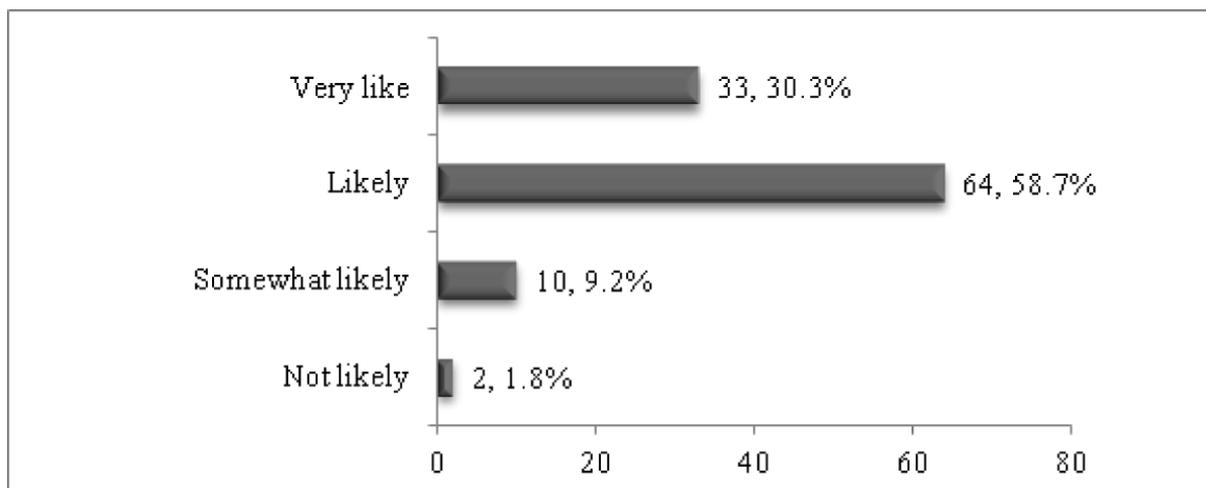
**Figure 3:** General performance of the OUM graduates compared to others

The study also found that 44.0 percent of the employers were very satisfied, 46.8 percent were satisfied and 6.4 percent were somewhat satisfied (see Figure 4). Only 2.8 percent of employers were not satisfied with OUM graduates.



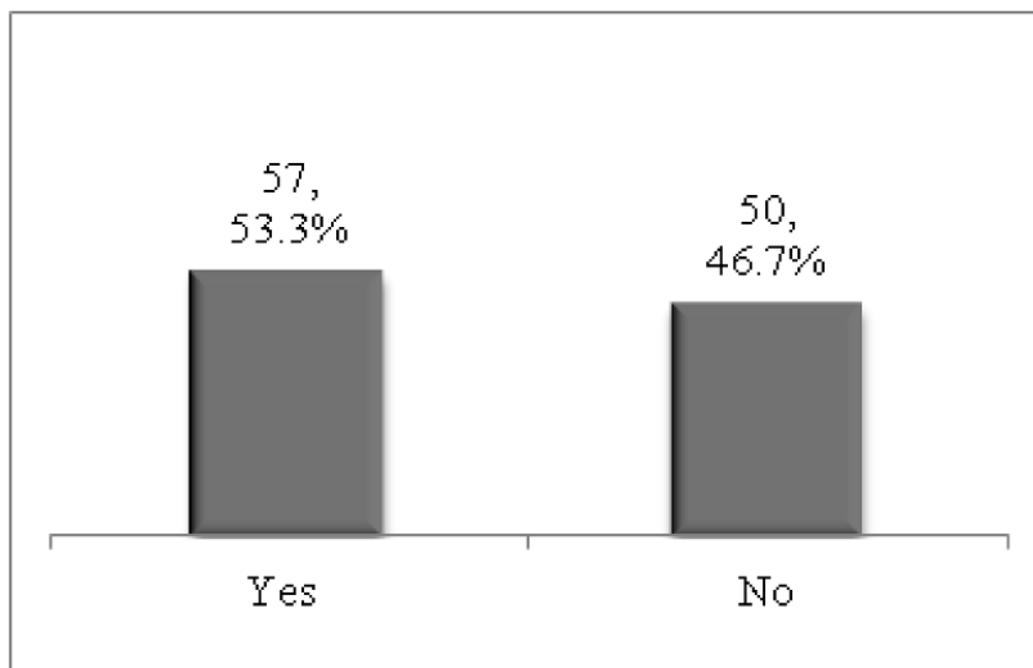
**Figure 4:** Overall satisfaction with the employee's knowledge and skills

On the likelihood of employing OUM graduates, 30.3 percent of employers indicated that they will *very likely* employ OUM graduates, while 58.7 percent will *likely* and 9.2 percent *somewhat likely* to do so (Figure 5). This gives a total 98.2 percent of employers who will *likely* employ graduates from OUM. Only 1.8 percent of employers indicated that they will *not likely* employ them.



**Figure 5:** The likelihood of employers employing OUM graduates

Finally, in terms promotion, this study found that a majority of 53.3 percent was promoted in their respective career with OUM academic qualifications (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Promotion based on OUM degrees

## DISCUSSION

The gaps for all items in this study range from a low of 2.6% to a maximum of 8.2%. This range of values is half of the maximum values calculated based on the empirical data obtained by Agus et al. (2011) and is certainly much less than the gaps obtained by Griesel and Parker (2009). Agus et. al. (2011) also found that the level of satisfaction was generally below the expectation level, with a mean gap of 14.4 percent obtained for the skills examined. The much lower values for the gaps obtained in this study compared to other studies seem to suggest that OUM's open and distance learning programmes have been successful in producing graduates who meet the expectations of their employers with regard to the four different types of skills. Nevertheless, the comparison between the quadrants implies that efforts are needed to improve the strategies in the transfer of skills. Concentrated efforts are needed in improving this status in an effort to enhance its reputation as an effective higher education provider, at par with the conventional universities in the country.

In the Importance-Satisfaction quadrant, a large number of items are in the HIHS or the strength quadrant, implying that a majority of employers in this study perceives that OUM graduates do exhibit important skills in their organisation and are capable of applying these skills to their satisfaction. However, there are also a number of items that fall under the LIHS (32.6%), HILS (4.7%) and LILS (4.7%) quadrants. Re-allocating resources in the items under the LIHS to areas that are considered more important by employers would be the best option for OUM. For the items under the LILS quadrant, immediate efforts to improve its achievement may not be crucial. The items in the HILS quadrant, which employers place very high importance but are not satisfied with them, are of concern to the university. There are two items in this quadrant, namely, Presentation skills and Critical and Analytical skills. This suggests that efforts need to be undertaken by OUM to improve on these skill sets.

Notwithstanding the above positive feedback, there is still room for further improvements. The findings in this paper highlight the top five items with the highest importance-

satisfaction gaps, the highest being Fluency in English. This result at first appears to be perplexing in view of the tremendous emphasis on the English language at OUM. Students are required to undertake a minimum of three courses in English: Oral Communication, Written Communication and a programme related English course. In fact, English is the primary medium of instruction for most of its programmes, and this can be alarming. There is an urgent need for a review on the usage and teaching of English at the university. A research evaluating the state of English usage by learner in OUM is being carried out at present together with a separate project which offers an additional English course via MOOCs. The second largest gap is observed in verbal communication and this prompts the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the Oral Communication course as well as the Written Communication in English. This course is offered to all OUM learners. The following instructional components have been cited as potentially helpful to help learners increase their English language proficiency: visuals and demonstrations, scaffolded instruction, targeted vocabulary development, connections to student experiences, student-to-student interaction, appropriate use of supplementary materials, sufficient opportunities for oral English development, and explicit teaching of language learning strategies as discussed in the following works of (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; August & Shanahan, 2006). In addition, a review on the course delivery including type of activities and type of assessment in all English courses may lead to better acquisition of this second language skill. As noted by Hager, Holland and Beckett, (2002), "the process of acquisition of generic skills would appear to be part of the overall learning process which is idiosyncratic, generally invisible and often intuitive". Incorporating such skills needs to be done in a spiral manner whereby students are given opportunities to develop the skills incrementally as they progress in their studies.

The concern on the general qualities dimension is also highlighted in this paper. The item with the highest gap in this dimension is the item on Professional ethics. This is also equally surprising as OUM offers a course on Professional Ethics to all its students. This calls for a thorough review of its learning outcomes, and a greater emphasis on the tutors to fully appreciate the learning outcomes and use appropriate activities and instructions so that students are satisfied and feel that they have achieved what they are supposed to acquire after completing the said course.

Lastly, the item on Problem-solving skill with a similar large gap needs equal attention. OUM offers Thinking Skill and Problem Solving as part of the curriculum in all of OUM programmes. While, there may not be any problem with the content of the course, there is a need to revise and introduce effective activities that may engage the learners more effectively in order to achieve the desired course learning outcomes. One of the tools used to develop the above skills is the academic curriculum, which is a vehicle through which attributes can be transferred during the learning process. In general the teaching and learning assumes a self-study format, which is guided by a tutor (face-to-face and online). This self-study approach is actually the tacit goal of higher education as it produces scholars who can work independently. However, the variations among all students in the classroom, (face-to-face and online) compounded by variations in their English proficiency levels and cultural background poses a great challenge.

While improving students' Knowledge and Understanding of subject matter may be more objectively measured and has traditionally been the mainstay of tertiary education, the development of General Attributes and Generic Skills need to be given greater emphasis. As Kiley and Cannon (2000) emphasized, "Taking lifelong learning as a goal, we would need to address these skills and attitudes as students go through the university. Some of the skills and attitudes students learn involve gauging their own weaknesses and designing remedies" (p. 11). Taking up this suggestion, students could perhaps be required to assess their own attributes and generic skills on a yearly basis and track their progress towards self-

improvement in the course of their studies. Future research may include student profiling so that courses and programmes are tailored to their needs with a view to improve student success, throughput and retention.

The most gratifying aspect of this study was that more than 90% of employers felt that OUM graduates were better or at least of the same quality as new graduates from other universities. This augurs well for the further contribution of ODL programmes towards human capital development. It certainly places OUM, as a relatively young ODL university at par or better when compared to its other conventional campus-based higher education providers.

## CONCLUSION

OUM offers the working adults the opportunity to further their education and the nation a means for human capital investment. This study clearly indicates that OUM has been successful in producing graduates who meet the requirements and satisfaction level of their employers. Needless to say, OUM's journey is far from over and it will never rest on its laurels. Diligent efforts at improving itself in its delivery modes, development of learning materials, assessments, learner support services and others are focused on satisfying the needs of its learners. To date, OUM has produced more than 57,000 graduates in various academic disciplines and career paths. However, there is ample room for improvements especially in the following items: Fluency in English, Verbal communication, Professional ethics, Written communication and Problem solving skills. Further adjustment and upgrading of the curricular will help enhance these skills among its graduates.

The feedback from employers such as the one reported in this study is a critical element in the success of our nation's lifelong learning agenda as it provides the much needed information on the employability skills sets that are of importance in the workplace. This study, in particular, bears testimony to the fact that ODL institution, such as OUM, just like any other universities, will play its role in contributing significantly to the development of Malaysia's human capital development.

## REFERENCES

- Advameg Inc. (2014). *Encyclopaedia of Children's Health: Cognitive Development*. Retrieved on 16/11/2015.
- Agus, A., Awang, A. H., Yussof, I., & Mohamed Makhbul, Z. K. (2011). *The gap analysis of graduate employees' work skills in Malaysia*. Retrieved on the 10 Dec 2015 from [bai-conference.org/BAI2011/Papers/7](http://bai-conference.org/BAI2011/Papers/7). OB&HRM/7012.doc
- August, D., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Carnegie Corporation of New York.* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- COL and ADB. (1999). *An Overview of Open and Distance Learning*. Vancouver, Canada: The Commonwealth of Learning and Asian Development Bank.
- Dacre Pool, L., & Sewell, P. (2007). The key to employability: Developing a practical model of graduate employability", *Education + Training*, 49 (4), 277 – 289
- DeVellis, R. F. (1991). *Scale development*. Newbury Park, NJ: Sage Publications

- Economic Planning Unit (EPU). (2010). *10th Malaysia Plan: 2011-2015*. Putrajaya, Malaysia: EPU.
- Griesel, H. & Parker, B. 2009. Graduate attributes. A baseline study on South African graduates from the perspective of employers. Pretoria: Higher Education South Africa & South African Qualifications Authority.
- Hager, P., Holland, S., & Beckett, D. (2002). Enhancing the learning and employability of graduates: The role of generic skills. *Business/Higher Education Round Table Position Paper No. 9*. Melbourne: Shell House.
- Kiley, M., & Cannon, R. (2000). *Leap into Lifelong Learning*. Adelaide: The University of Adelaide.
- Kirkpatrick, D. (2005). *Quality assurance in open and distance learning*. Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning.
- Kleinke, J. (2006). 2005 Noel-Levitz Employer Satisfaction Survey. Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, Utah State University.
- Knight, P.T. and Yorke, M. (2003). Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(1), 3-16.
- Manuelli, R.E. (2015). Human Capital and Development. Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis Review, Third Quarter. 95(2).197-216.
- National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC). (2009). *New Economic Model for Malaysia: Part 1*. Putrajaya, Malaysia: NEAC.
- Short, D., & Fitzsimmons, S. (2007). Double the work: Challenges and solutions to acquiring language and academic literacy for adolescent English language learners. (A report to Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.