

Internal and external contexts influencing future accountants: The lens of experienced auditors

Azleen Ilias¹, Erlane K Ghani^{2*}, Kamaruzzaman Mohammad³, Mazurina Mohd Ali⁴, Nor Atikah Rosley⁵

¹Department of Accounting and Finance, College of Business and Administration, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia; azleens@uniten.edu.my (A.I).

^{2,3,4,5}Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Selangor, Malaysia; erlanekg@uitm.edu.my (E.K.G) kamaruzzaman@uitm.edu.my (K.M) mazurina@uitm.edu.my (M.M.A) atkhirsly@gmail.com (N.A.R).

Abstract: This study examines the factors influencing future accountants from the lens of experienced auditors. This study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on the challenges and issues faced by future accountants, with the aim of enhancing career opportunities that align with employer needs. Interviews with eight experienced auditors, along with the analysis of public documents from the respective accounting regulatory authority and the Ministry of Higher Education, provided the data for this case study. Based on the insights of the experienced auditors, this study developed two contexts, namely an internal and an external context, which could benefit employers and future accountants. The internal context includes attitude and behaviour, continuous learning and adaptability, technical skills, technical knowledge, and career development. The external context includes university standards, the needed IT skills, lack of soft skills, and inability to acquire technical knowledge. The specific factors for both the internal and external contexts could be employer expectations, university requirements, and graduate interest in this area of accounting, which tailor the Hala Tuju 4 and MIA competency frameworks. The findings of this study provide new insights in accounting education that can contribute to future research. Furthermore, this study can provide insights into skills, knowledge, and potential factors that are important for future accounting professionals, which could also be included in the university curriculum to accommodate Hala Tuju 4.

Keywords: *Accounting Profession, Employers, External, Internal, University.*

1. Introduction

The demand for professional accountants has increased due to the ever-changing accounting legislation and economic climate, as well as the increasing globalization of today's business environment (ACCA, 2016). However, the accounting field is currently experiencing increasing technological disruption, which has led to a shift in the skills and abilities expected of accounting graduates. This industry is currently undergoing a period of change. Currently, employers are looking for graduates who not only demonstrate a strong technical understanding but also the ability to successfully utilise technology and data analytics to thrive in an ever-evolving profession (Winterton & Turner, 2019). By incorporating technology-related topics (Moffitt, Rozario, & Vasarhelyi, 2018), promoting critical thinking and flexibility (Tan & Laswad, 2018), and emphasising the importance of continuous learning and professional growth, accounting education programmes must adapt to meet the ever-changing demands of the profession.

Introduced in 2015, Hala Tuju 3 serves as the cornerstone of the accounting curriculum. The Malaysian Ministry of Education and the MIA have collaborated to create an accounting curriculum (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022). The purpose of Hala Tuju 3 is to address some of the

shortcomings that were present in Hala Tuju 2, namely in relation to the provision of accounting references. There is an improvement from Hala Tuju 2 to Hala Tuju 4. Ku Bahador and Haider (2017) found that the introduction of Hala Tuju 2 enhanced the ability of accounting students to acquire valuable soft skills. Norman, Latif, and Mohd Said (2018), on the other hand, found that employers were not responding satisfactorily in terms of students' technical and soft skills. These skills include the ability to communicate and interact, the ability to apply technical knowledge, critical thinking, and the ability to solve problems. The introduction of Hala Tuju 3 aimed to enhance the learning outcomes of accounting programmes by addressing the current demands of the profession and industry (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022). These requirements essentially called for the improvement of deficient skills in areas such as communication, critical thinking, knowledge application, ethics, and competitiveness.

This study aims to explore the factors that may influence employer perspectives regarding the future of accounting professionals, from the perspective of experience auditors. This study can contribute in understanding on the factors influencing future accountants. The next section, Section 2 provides a comprehensive analysis of the relevant academic works on this topic. Section 3 presents the research methodology, and Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 serves as the study's concluding section.

2. Literature Review

Employability is the set of skills, knowledge, experience, and personal attributes that make a person more likely to obtain employment in their preferred field (Tsiligiris & Bowyer, 2021). In this context, employers portray universities as producers of graduates who possess the necessary skills. However, studies have shown that the employability of graduates depends not only on their skills and attributes but also on several other variables that lie outside the educational process (Clarke, 2018). For example, university reputation plays a crucial role in graduates' employability, as do existing soft skills, defined as interpersonal and social skills, including behaviours and attitudes, that influence how people interact with others and lead to success in the workplace (Matteson, Anderson, & Boyden, 2016; Tan & Laswad, 2018). Therefore, graduate employability is categorized into two components: (1) social capital, and (2) human capital and individual characteristics.

Social capital in the form of social class, personal networks, and university reputation interact with human capital to play an important role in graduate employability (Succi & Canovi, 2019), while the human capital component of graduate employability refers to graduates' skills, competences, and work experience (Clarke, 2018). Beyond human capital, personal attributes such as adaptability and flexibility, along with behaviours related to career development and self-management, collectively referred to as soft skills, increasingly influence the employability of graduates (Schulz, 2008). The Outlook of the Accountancy Profession in Malaysia report by the Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA) (Malaysian Institute of Accountants, 2020) aligns with this, outlining the training requirements for future accountants to remain employable and relevant in the market. The skills discussed by the MIA include digital skills, lifelong learning, English proficiency, soft skills such as teamwork, leadership and communication, emotional intelligence, and analytical and thinking skills.

From the employers' perspective, they seek graduates for qualities such as the knowledge and ideas they bring to an organisation, their willingness to learn and do so quickly, their flexibility, adaptability, and ability to deal with change, their analytical and logical skills, problem-solving and synthesis abilities, and their impact on innovation (Harvey & Mason, 1996). In the era of Industry 4.0, employers grapple with the challenge of sourcing quality talent to maintain their organisational performance, given the global talent pool. Therefore, if the skills of domestic graduates remain at current levels, employers are likely to prefer hiring foreign graduates over domestic graduates from public universities, as noted by CSAP. Some developed countries have already defined the skills and competencies of accounting graduates to provide a better picture of competencies. For example: Salman, Ganie, and Saleem (2020) defined competence as the application of individual attributes like knowledge, skills, and attitudes in specific work contexts. The role of accountants in today's competitive world, has raised the

question of what exactly are the most important skills needed by an accountant in Malaysia's current market (Ngoo, Tiong, & Pok, 2015).

Singh, Thambusamy, and Ramly (2014) found that accounting graduates' employability has expanded beyond academic qualifications and work experience to include more non-technical or work-related skills that support the organization's work process. This has raised the question of whether universities are able to provide such skills to their students. Gyekye and Amo (2024) have identified the top five key skills that companies expect accounting graduates to have: the ability to understand business ethics and integrity, the ability to solve problems and analyse decisions, the ability to communicate effectively in writing, the ability to learn effectively, and the ability to apply accounting concepts effectively. This suggests that technical skills continue to be an important attribute most often demonstrated by accounting graduates. Furthermore, a study by Blasco Burriel, Costa Toda, and Labrador Barrafón (2023) reveals notable deficiencies in the skills students acquire. This emphasizes the importance of engaging both employers and students in collaboration to shape the academic competencies required to develop future accounting professionals. To ensure that graduates are adequately equipped to meet the ever-changing demands of the accounting profession, it is critical to close the gap created by efforts to align curricula more closely with industry expectations. This will ensure that graduates are adequately prepared for the accounting profession.

Several empirical studies in the accounting field have shown that employers increasingly value the soft skills of accounting employees. The Ministry of Higher Education has actively encouraged universities to include soft skill development in their programmes. Focusing on topics such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, learning, creativity, responsibility, leadership, and decision-making is crucial in modern education (Yong & Ling, 2023). Micallef et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of a learner possessing a variety of skills, including written and oral communication, integrative skills, and analytical skills. Md Pazil and Che Razli (2019) found that Malaysian graduates fail to meet the academic and personal expectations of employers. According to Jackson (2016), there need to be open channels of communication between the various stakeholders to identify key competencies needed in the workforce. He also outlines concrete ways to close the gap that currently exists. Furthermore, Thi and Ngoc (2024) demonstrated the importance placed on intellectual qualities, particularly critical thinking, across a variety of demographic groups. It is important to note that these studies show that different work-related responsibilities within the organisation are associated with different assessments of the value of personal skills. The various work-related responsibilities across industries influence personal skills.

A body of the literature has also identified significant discrepancies between the skills that employers expect from accounting graduates and the skills that accounting graduates actually possess in the professional environment. According to Thi and Ngoc (2024), there is a significant gap between employers' expectations and trainees' perceptions of the important skills and knowledge required in the field of accounting and auditing. Indeed, employers place a greater emphasis on the multiple functions that accountants perform, which is in complete contrast to the importance that educators and students place on accountants. Furthermore, Alsughayer and Alsultan (2023) emphasize the importance of prioritizing technical skills over more general skills such as interpersonal, communication, and language skills. It is interesting to note that when observing the expectation gap and the required skills in the industry, there seems to be a correlation among both professionals working in the industry and faculty members. In addition, the comprehensive study by Benitez, Balmadres, Panoril, Alfanta and Naparan (2024) examined the extent to which employers are satisfied with graduates who have completed their education at financial institutions. The study identifies a number of core competencies that are considered essential. These include a knowledge base, entrepreneurial skills, technological skills, flexibility, teamwork, and transferable skills. According to these fruitful observations, there is a need to continuously develop and update curricula so that companies can perceive them as coherent overall with their high expectations. This move can better prepare and position future accounting program

graduates to respond to and effectively manage the ever-changing landscape of the accounting profession.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Respondents

This study drew participants from the ranks of owners, partners, and senior executives of various accounting firms as shown in Table 1. Owners' selection criteria should include extensive experience in hiring and managing accounting graduates, as well as a thorough understanding of industry expectations.

Table 1.
Interview participants.

Firm organisation	Position	Identity of Respondent	Code of conversation	Date	Time allocation
Firm SF	Audit partner cum Senior manager	SF1 SF2	The code started with T	18 January 2024	45 minutes
Firm G	Audit partner cum Senior manager	G1 G2	The code started with G	14 January 2024	108 minutes
Firm TC	Audit partner cum Senior manager	TC1 TC2	The code started with TC	9 January 2024	90 minutes
Firm S	Audit partner cum Senior manager	S1 S2	The code started with S	5 March 2024	90 minutes

For this sample selection, the chosen respondents must have extensive experience in hiring and managing accounting graduates. They should have a thorough understanding of the skills and competencies required in the accounting profession. Additionally, this study selects respondents from key positions within the organisation, such as audit partners and senior managers, to provide a diverse perspective on the expectations and readiness of accounting graduates.

3.2. Data Collection and Instrument

Eight participants in this study assumed the role of the employer in semi-structured interviews. This study chose this approach to explore employers' expectations and experiences, gaining insight into their perception of reality. This study used an interview guide that selected conceptually broad questions to comprehensively cover all relevant topics, while still allowing participants to freely express their opinions. By using these questions, this study avoided asking leading questions. The instruments used in the study focused on achieving the following objectives in relation to employers' expectations of accounting graduates: The study sought to elicit relevant information through questions such as assessing accounting graduates' professional competence, assessing the need for lifelong learning, and establishing the desired attitude and behaviour in the workplace during employment. In addition, the study investigated the extent to which universities were equipping graduates with relevant accounting knowledge and skills and whether these expectations matched graduates' preparation for working life, thus exploring the educational gaps in accounting graduates' training and preparation. This approach complemented the data collection by providing significant public material, such as the MIA Competency Framework, Halatuju 3, and Halatuju 4, which identify trends in accounting graduates' preparation for their employers and associated expectations.

3.3. Data Analysis

This study used Atlas TI8.0 for data analysis to organise and create themes from the interview material. This study describes the professional competence required of accounting graduates, the assessment of the need for lifelong learning, and the determination of desired attitudes and behaviours in the workplace during employment based on the themes and key quotes from the interviewees. The researchers documented each viewpoint on employer expectations and experiences using a notebook, Excel format, or a snapshot or screenshot of a dialogue. Each statement indicating an opinion was created in Microsoft Word and submitted to ATLAS.ti for code-based analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saladana, 2014; Ilias, Baidi, & Ghani, 2023).

For data analysis, this study began with first-cycle coding, originally summarising data segments and using descriptive coding. The researchers then used patterns based on predetermined coding and indeterminate variables from previous studies (Benitez et al. 2024). Ten parameters, recognised and created based on the coding trends of the eight respondents who participated in this study, formed the basis of the coding procedure.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Internal Context

4.1.1. Attitude and Behaviour

This study identified a factor that relates to employers' perceptions of students' attitudes and behaviours. This study can categorise this based on the internal forces that shape students' development. In this study, the respondents exhibit behaviours that they perceive as unmotivated and disengaged in the workplace; various factors such as generation, societal culture, changes in education, and the work environment may contribute to these attitudes. Additionally, this study reveals that employers view previous graduates as more dedicated and eager to exceed expectations in their workplace. With this attitude, employers believed that current generation employees are not loyal to their employers and therefore cannot work for a long time without changing companies or employers cannot develop long-term support. Additionally, the employer noted that students who are willing to learn and take risks succeed. The following statement serves as evidence:

"Universities taught and moulded many graduates, but some managed to perform well while others were not capable. I don't know who to blame. Things changed; attitudes changed." (TC9).

"Alright, since we have different industries, we'll give them a chance to try out each one. Usually, they won't speak up, saying, 'I can't, I can't.' Instead, they'll say, 'I can't do it.' It's okay; you all try first. If it doesn't work out, I'll take a look." (G35).

"Ok, that's a very good question. Yes, I do, so I do think they should be able to work independently, but of course I mean partner of the firm or leader of the firm. We got to be fair also. But I think it's good for students, but nowadays not most of them require a lot of guidance. There are seniors to be with them at the client space. Not so sure why again this could be some generation gap as well." (S24).

"Usually, when we meet them for the first time, we can tell if they're interested in this field or not. In terms of mistakes, if there are too many mistakes, it means they're not interested. We can tell; after a while, we've been around for a long time, and we know their trends, whether they're interested or not." (G5).

"I think this generation felt that loyalty is not; I couldn't feel they have a sense of loyalty... But maybe one good thing about the people at the firm is that we don't have that issue that much." (S6).

In sum, attitude and behaviour are crucial factors for ensuring career success in any job. Therefore, attitude and behaviour must be internal factors due to an individual's intrinsic motivation and commitment to their job.

4.1.2. Continuous Learning and Adaptability

The second component that could impact future accountants is the emphasis on establishing and developing processes that enable continuous learning and assessment of our future graduates through education. This requirement is crucial to the training approach, which aims to implement control mechanisms that keep staff up-to-date with market practices and standards, thereby enhancing their technical skills and professional capacity. Employers, when it comes to current issues in tax and/or accounting, emphasise the importance of keeping up with current trends. Herein lies a major disadvantage: seeking knowledge from the courses attended by professionals working in this field requires both time and money for the individual, often including membership in an association to obtain the certificate. This financial aspect of training can discourage qualified graduates from gaining knowledge and continuing their education, limiting their growth in the field. Another factor is the expectation that, as a student or graduate, one must secure employment to reinforce their acquired knowledge and further their education. This shows that learners are required to keep up to date and work professionally, especially in areas such as accounting and auditing, where policies and procedures change from time to time. Despite feeling well-prepared, all graduates perceive their ability to cope with workplace changes and pressures as inadequate. Employers favour individuals who are able to work harder, be flexible, and develop both personally and professionally. The following statement provides evidence of this:

"We need to go revise and study. We took out the books, the standards, and read them." (G2).

"If they're a fast learner, they can finish it in one or two days. If it takes them a week, then I can tell it's taking too long. In terms of career progression, the company doesn't have any issues then" (G6).

"We have consistent training for our staff. I mean, in terms of accounting standard training, practical—how you conduct audits, training on the latest update on budget. Mostly on the topics that were recently updated in tax and accounting and what we conduct internally." (SF1)

"If you want to learn and come to the right place, you can progress." (TC7).

"They ask us to become members, but everything needs to be paid for... At least, there should be some knowledge that we can gain. But to know something, you have to pay. They only organise something once or twice a year; in terms of payment, they do it like that." (G39).

"Here, even if you're fresh, we'll guide you through all the auditing procedures. If you don't understand a concept, you ask. (G1) "If there's something new, like a new accounting statement, he'll update us. Since this is ongoing, there's a lot happening, right? So, he'll update us, and then we'll buy books and read them ourselves first (laughs)." (G2)

In sum, continuous learning and adaptability must therefore be an internal factor, as employees' proactive attitude towards seeking new learning opportunities and adapting to change is influenced by their own motivation and the support of their immediate work environment.

4.1.3. Technical Skill

In this study, the required technical skill serves as another internal context for the third component. Firstly, while fully aware of the theories, graduates do not apply them sufficiently. This is where theory and practice part ways. The ability to link different facts together and develop a competent understanding is of great importance. This ability necessitates the use of integrated thinking to arrive at specific conclusions after examining various areas. This is an area that graduates are particularly lacking in, meaning that actions are not based on proper evaluation and analysis. Making judgments is an essential part of almost any professional activity, especially when the field is very complicated and the consequences of the decisions made are quite severe. For instance, these individuals are inexperienced lawyers who lack the ability to make sound judgments. The following statement serves as evidence:

"Graduates are needed to connect the dots and exercise judgment." (TC14)

"Theory-wise, no problem, but we should also pay more attention to the practicality of applying this knowledge in real-life situations." (G1)

"Graduates are important to connect the dots and exercise judgement in accounting." (G2)

In sum, the motivation and support of employees greatly influence their willingness to enhance their technical skill.

4.1.4. Technical Knowledge

Employers are also concerned about the acquisition and application of technical skills by students within the organization. Familiarity with the basics of accounting and experience in using certain tools, such as Microsoft Excel, are a must. Apart from technical skills, graduates should endeavour to understand the business environment. This knowledge will facilitate their decision-making and enable them to work effectively in their position. Each business area has its own specific accounting and auditing requirements. Graduates should be aware of these differences and apply this knowledge according to the requirements of the industry. Graduates should be able to assess and respond to risks. Daily tasks directly relate to this ability, which is crucial for audit decision-making. The following statement provides proof of this:

"They start to put when they are doing some of the procedures, but when they are able to understand, if not in great detail, as when they share or discuss, I guess that will help in achieving our objectives when performing procedures." (S23).

"There can't be any mistakes because if there are mistakes, the adjustments will be troublesome, affecting tax matters." How about in terms of business and decision-making environments like we mentioned earlier, where we lack international law?" ... "If the person lacks knowledge, they won't be able to produce a complete set of accounts. It's just not possible." (G8).

"The minimum... I would expect them to understand the basics of accounting and Excel. I would expect my fresh graduates who join us to be sufficient for us to get them on board as auditors" (S8).

"So, I think at the end of the day, can they understand, understand, can they have a good depth of understanding of the organisation on the business? Is something that is not that new because for a student or fresh graduate, if they are looking at things from a very micro perspective of the career, at the end of the day it goes back to not only the syllabus but the effort of the fresh graduates?" (S16).

"To start with, I expect them to at least know accounting standards. To know about tax law." (SF21). I expect them to know. Able to tell and make the necessary adjustments based on the based on the required knowledge on journal entries. So yeah, it is very important for them to know." (SF25).

"What I expect from them is that at least they are able to identify and detect this kind of risk and demonstrate their audit work. It is natural to have mistakes, but we hope they rectify those mistakes each time they finalise a file." (G18).

In sum, employees' interest in the subject matter and the task at hand influences their willingness to improve their technical knowledge, making it a necessary internal factor.

4.1.5. Career Development

Career development is the fifth component of personnel management. Looking at the roles and responsibilities of organisations for the development of the accounting profession as a whole is important to developing skills. Students and graduates should adopt a mindset that encompasses not only their duties in their current positions, but also their responsibility for the profession's advancement. This means that the accounting profession is characterised by constant change as it responds to a dynamic business environment, changing rules and regulations, and advances in technology. Students and graduates must familiarize themselves with these changes in order to have relevant knowledge and skills in the labour market. Individuals involved in the preparation of financial statements, such as accountants, must follow guidelines to achieve consistency and adhere to a set of rules. Nevertheless, it is understandable that some tasks a student performs during their internship may seem redundant. Finding a suitable company for an internship is essential for students to gain new practical experience. During their internship, interns immerse themselves in the company's culture, practices, and procedures, fostering a more cohesive learning experience. The following statement provides evidence of this:

"In my opinion, fresh graduates should join an audit firm first so that they understand what they've learned. They can't just directly enter the commercial line; they should join an audit firm first. Once they know how to do it, it gets easier—not to say they'll be fully skilled, but it may facilitate their career afterwards." (G40).

"So, I think our involvement in developing the accounting profession does not stop within the firm; we are looking at the bigger picture." (S2)

"There are a lot of changes in our business environment as compared to the last 5 years. I can't even develop much expectation of graduates nowadays. I would say, I see graduates 5, 10 years ago are more committed to their works." (T12)

"Things like subsequent events are already covered by our guidelines, so it's just a matter of following them without adding anything extra." ... "Did you notice that it's the same thing over and over again during the six-month internship?" (G25).

"For practical experience, they should really choose a firm to do their internship at. It's better for them to stay within the firm because it's easier for them. So, when you want to work in a new work environment, you already have something there. Even if it's just six months, don't just go and play around; once it's finished, it's done." (G9)

To summarise, professional development must be an internal factor, as employees are interested in continuous professional development. The importance of professional development is needed to improve career programmes that work with industry to prepare students with comprehensive knowledge and skills.

4.2. External Context

4.2.1. University Standard

The university standards are the first aspect that relates to the external context. Here, certain aspects of the curriculum or teaching methods can be improved to better prepare students for the diverse realities of accounting. To adequately prepare graduates for professional demands, efforts have been made to include more practice-oriented material and topical issues in the course. The respondents were aware that some of the students are good while others have difficulty applying the theories learned to practical cases. The emphasis here is on the instructors' efforts to bridge this gap through the use of

cases and practical references. The ideas and suggestions put forward by students and other stakeholders are based on the need to equip graduates with knowledge and skills related to ESG issues, as they are known internationally and in line with the concept of corporate responsibility. The inclusion of ESG topics in the curriculum would help students solve modern problems and adapt to changing demands. A restricted curriculum could hinder creativity, critical thinking, and the application of knowledge in "real life. We should approach and assess some subjects more flexibly to better tailor them to the needs of individual students and professions. The following statement provides evidence of this:

"Hmm, ok, let me answer based on my observation and specifically in accounting. I don't think, I mean, to be honest, it's not. I'm not saying that this is something that should interest the academia... I think it's neither worsening nor improving, so I think something for the academia to ponder is how you want to improve certain subjects or the syllabus in general to fully equip the graduates." (S27)

"I think that's too subjective because I felt that some of the university students are quite good, probably some of them not really... So I think it's how the lecturer can try to share a real case as much as they can so that it can be very interesting." (G18)

"Yes, yes. We should be able to, and we should move towards that to ensure that our graduates are ESG-ready. It is important. So back to your questions. It is high time for the university and academia to look seriously at ESG and how they can embed ESG topics too (SF15).

"I think our syllabus is just too rigid." (TC13).

In sum, external factors such as partnerships and collaborations between universities and industry, which enhance the relevance and practical application of education, necessitate the implementation of university standards.

4.2.2. Skills Needed

The second external context pertains to the diverse skills required by individuals operating in a specific industry. Rather than solving problems for students in a clear way, students are expected to be able to nuance issues themselves and report the problems accurately as they are. This emphasis illustrates that timely problem-solving and communication skills are critical to career development in accounting. The auditing environment views project management skills as crucial tools due to the specific timelines it requires and the coordination of individuals and departments. Recognise that, as a recent graduate, the accounting graduates must practically learn these skills before entering the workforce. They should graduate from university with a degree in project management skills, understanding that they will gain further mastery as they gain experience in the real world. Employers have stated their desire and willingness to look at technical competence in accounting graduates, but they are more interested in communication, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to work as part of a team. Such skills are useful when it comes to interacting with clients, working in groups, or even taking responsibility in an organisation. The following statement serves as evidence of this.

"Oh, I think project management is very important. When we do an audit, we do a lot of (unclear) things. In our discussion, you will see clients in the morning, and you should be able to discuss certain issues with your colleagues in the second half of it. So, project management is very important and one of the key skills that we evaluate. When we do the morning, and you should be able to discuss certain issues with your colleagues in the second half of it. So, project management is very important and one of the key skills that we evaluate. When we do our evaluation, yes, it's important. In fact, it's very important because of the time limitations that you have from one to another, but again, for a fresh graduate, this is a basic skill that have from one to another, but again, for a fresh graduate, this is a basic skill that will come with experience, so to answer your question, it is quite important." (S25).

In terms of communication skills, so far as I've taken them, there haven't been any issues. So far, for me, the fresh graduates who have come in have been okay, meaning they haven't had any problems meeting those requirements I mentioned, like being willing to learn." (G4).

"In terms of written communication, expect from fresh graduates regarding how they compose emails... we've been told before that 'your staff is rude,'... it's best that we assign it to seniors for now before they can proceed." (G34)

"Oh no, I think decision modelling I don't expect them to expect too much, but at the minimum, they understand the basics of decision modelling or decision-making skills... more to intellectual skill; this can be guided from literature, but it's based on their own maturity." (S20).

"Our requirements aren't high; it's just basic, basic accounting only, and a few communication skills, interpersonal skills, just a bit because we want to work with people; we want to talk to clients, face bosses, like that... So, I expect it to be like that; if we talk about needing those things, they should have them. (G42).

"We make you speak to me as if I am your client, and how do you construct the question based on how you gather the information that you wish? That is ongoing, actually. Every year we have a review of what happened—you know, a case study of what we have in our day-to-day job—and from there, there is group discussion on how you should tackle the situation." (SF7)

In sum, the skills required must be an external factor, as changes in the labour market dictate the specific skills required by employers and the way in which the accounting profession has defined and promoted the essential skills for accounting professionals. The skills employers require and the accounting curriculum that aligns with market demands.

4.2.3. *IT Skill Needed*

The third element from the external context is the IT skills that employers need for their tasks. It is obvious that employers have high expectations that graduates have at least a basic understanding of a particular accounting or auditing software. This requirement stems from the fact that different firms use a variety of software, each with its own unique tools and controls. For this reason, the emphasis is on initial employability and ensuring that graduates are able to learn new modules as they enter the world of work. Students and staff appreciate the incorporation of proprietary software. Not only does it guide them in their activities, but it also enhances their understanding of examination procedures. Students find comfort in software that integrates the company's characteristics and standards into their training, as it enhances the auditing concepts imposed on them. The following statement provides evidence of this:

"...graduates to have at least some basic or basic skills of accounting or auditing software...different firms will have their own operating software...the fact that if you want to talk about can universities audit students learning it would be possible..." (S12).

"We are currently using our internally generated software. They felt very positive that this particular software helps as guidance and as a tool for them to at least understand auditing better." (G11).

In sum, the need for IT skills is an external factor, as rapid technological progress requires workers to constantly update their IT skills in order to remain competitive, as well as the quality of IT-related courses and training offered by educational institutions.

4.2.4. *Lack of Soft Skills*

The external environment determines the fourth factor, which is a lack of interpersonal skills. The interviewers identified inadequate communication skills as one of the main problem areas for graduates. This could be due to difficulty summarising ideas and presenting them in an understandable and professional language, or it could be due to limited exposure to language and appropriate practice in

other professional interactions. Some graduates appear to have impaired areas such as interpersonal communication skills, assertiveness, and the ability to work in a team or present a professional demeanour. Such a lack may affect the ability to interact with colleagues or clients and, generally, negatively affect the outcome of work-related tasks that impact students' preparation during their studies. Observations suggest a lower level of self-confidence and critical thinking skills among graduates. Self-confidence is particularly important when presenting findings, contributing ideas, and in all dialogues. Sound reasoning enables graduates to investigate difficult audit challenges and make relevant inquiries, which are essential for thorough audits and client consultations. The following statement serves as evidence:

"One of the skills that I felt they were lacking was their communication skills, probably because of the common language." (S3)

"Their relationship is a bit concerning. I have encountered graduates that are unable to engage in basic conversations, not when I asked further." (SF9)

"We also have encountered a lot of graduates with good results but lack soft skills." (TC3)

"Some of them take things for granted. Universities taught and moulded many graduates, but some managed to perform well while others did not." (TC4)

"Graduates lack confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to ask appropriate questions due to a lack of knowledge. They struggle to articulate themselves effectively in professional settings." (SF30).

In sum, the lack of soft skills must be an external factor due to society's emphasis on the importance of soft skills, the availability of external workshops and seminars, and the inclusion of soft skills training in curricula.

4.2.5. Incapability in Technical Knowledge

The fifth external organisational factor identified is a lack of technical knowledge capability from an industry perspective. The ability to have self-confidence is part of how graduates bring and implement technical knowledge in accounting areas, according to the respondents. Confident individuals tend to make fewer mistakes, allowing them to better understand concepts and apply them to problem-solving or decision-making. Some graduates have a tendency to base their reasoning excessively on previous exam papers or others' opinions. In most cases, they merely confirm or reproduce them without shame and without final reflection. Such behaviour may indicate a lack of professional competence, which includes the use of analytical skills to independently analyse data, the applicable accounting standards, and the ability to formulate audit opinions based on current data as opposed to relying on examples.

Learners may barely fulfil the requirements for the technical factors needed for accounting in practice and therefore find it difficult to gain a foothold in the market. Although educational institutions anchor the knowledge base, applying knowledge in the field of auditing and accounting necessitates other developments. A particular problem arises from the fact that graduates are not immediately ready in terms of core competencies, including the ability to maintain simple financial balance sheets. This shows that there is a serious need for practical financial training required to enter a particular industry, especially accounting and auditing solutions. The following statement provides proof of this:

"(laughs) This is very interesting. Yeah, ok, I give you a scenario. It is very important for them to be quite confident to understand, and once they get the answer, they can go back to the technical and actually pick up the key points. Some of them are quite good at it again. When it comes to experience, there is no doubt about that." (S22)

"Fresh graduates tend to just follow last year's opinion for audit reports." (SF24)

"I think based on my own observation, if they lack technical skill, it's actually down to having the knowledge to carry themselves into the working world and apply it. All in all,

it's the students themselves, that's how I see it, so from time to time. I think those at the government, as the firm MIA, are doing as much as we can to hold forums." (S17)

"Can you believe me if I say that 80% of them can't even balance a financial position? So that is, for me, a primary disappointment to us." (TC14)

"They tend to follow last year's working papers without forming their own opinions, indicating deficiencies in technical skills." (G15)

"They (graduates) can't even handle to balance their financial position." (SF16)

In sum, the inability to acquire technical knowledge must be an external factor, as changes in industry standards and regulations, the availability and recognition of professional certificates, and the quality of education and training offered by universities can create gaps in technical knowledge that employees need to address.

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the factors that can be discovered from the employers' perspective in relation to future accounting professionals and graduates. This study used a qualitative method in this study, conducting interviews with four different firms, including eight partners in the accounting field who were considered relevant to contribute their insights to the study. The researchers conducted the majority of the study using questionnaires to identify the skills and knowledge that employers and trainers believe are important. This study identified ten factors, which Table 2 categorizes as either internal or external for future auditors.

Table 2.
Summaries of internal and external factors.

Theme	Internal factors	External factors
Attitude and behaviour	X	
Career development	X	
Continuous learning and adaptability	X	
Technical knowledge	X	
Technical skills	X	
IT skill needed		X
Lack of soft skills		XX
Skills needed		X
Incapability in technical knowledge		X
University standard		X

According to the findings, the internal factors include attitude and behaviour, continuous learning and adaptability, technical skills, technical knowledge, and career development. It is necessary to consider internal factors to promote the satisfaction and growth of future employees and enable organisations to identify any knowledge and skill gaps. External factors include university level, required IT skills, a lack of soft skills, and an inability to acquire technical skills. External factors are needed when a company is able to tailor a vocational program to an important area, industry trends, and resource allocation.

There are limitations to this study. Firstly, this study focused on an audit area that is more likely to be SMPs, which may offer different perspectives in terms of expectations, the importance of skills, and any challenges. Secondly, the study only focused on the future career development of accounting graduates without considering the organisational context. Therefore, the future study could focus more on different types of accounting professionals, such as accounting, reporting, company secretarial, and taxation, as well as other fields outside of insurance. In addition, this study could also focus on the

organisational context, which reveals many issues from an organisational perspective, such as resources, regulations, and human resources.

This study concludes that the findings of the study can lead to new insights in the field of accounting education and contribute to future research. In addition, this study can also provide insights into skills, knowledge, and possible factors that are important for future accounting professionals and that could also be included in the curriculum of universities to include Hala Tuju 4.

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