

Malaysian Graduates Employability Challenges: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching implications for individuals, societies, and economies, disrupting established patterns in education, employment, and career trajectories. This paper explores a narrative review of the literature that studied the graduates' employability post pandemic. Narrative review is suitable to be applied in this study, as it tends to achieve exploratory research where a new or emerging field is explored, providing holistic perspective in which a wide range of studies is summarized, consequently synthesizing diverse evidence that highlight the trends across various studies. This review highlights the multifaceted challenges facing Malaysian graduates, emphasizing the far-reaching circumstance of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduates' employment dynamics. It underscores disparities in the quality of employment, wage gaps, and the vulnerability of workers in informal sectors. A range of factors impacting employability can be considered, including self-efficacy, curriculum support, employability skills development, and work placement learning. The study also explores the impact of postgraduate studies on employment prospects, gender disparities in employability skills, and the significance of soft skills and non-technical skills in aviation careers. Furthermore, it delves into how graduates' knowledge and soft skills development vary by education level and how emerging concepts like Industry 5.0 are reshaping the employment landscape. Confronting globalization and evolving labor market dynamics, graduates must embrace self-development and adaptability so forth meeting the changing needs of the job market.

Keyword: narrative review; graduates; employability; post pandemic; Malaysia

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has set off a widespread crisis, leading to an extensive negative outcome of economic, social, and education. Malaysia, like many nations, has been profoundly affected by the pandemic, experiencing disruptions across multiple sectors. The outbreak, characterized by global infections and efforts to contain the virus, has had a significant influence on the employability of Malaysian graduates.

Malaysia has experienced profound socio-economic changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the virus, which led to widespread lockdowns and disruptions across various sectors, has significantly altered the landscape of graduate employability. As the world continues to grapple with the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic, the transition from education to employment for Malaysian graduates has become more complex and demanding than ever before.

Prior to the pandemic, Malaysia had a robust higher education system, churning out a substantial number of graduates across various fields every year. However, the pandemic has introduced a series of new and pressing challenges that have implications for graduate employability.

The pandemic has led to economic disruptions, including recessionary trends, reduced economic growth, and increased unemployment. As businesses faced closures and downsizing, many employees were laid off or furloughed, causing job market uncertainty for both job seekers and those already employed.

Many companies in Malaysia have scaled back their hiring activities. Some have frozen recruitment, while others have adopted more cautious hiring strategies. This has made it more difficult for job seekers, especially recent graduates, to secure employment. The pandemic has affected industries differently. While some sectors, such as healthcare, e-commerce, and technology, experienced growth and increased hiring, others, like hospitality, tourism, and retail, suffered severe setbacks. Such a fluctuating phenomenon has created uncertainty about which industries offer stable employment.

Some job seekers have turned to entrepreneurship and the gig economy as alternative forms of employment during the pandemic. This shift raises questions about job security, social protection, and income stability. Government policies and stimulus measures have aimed to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the job market. However, the effectiveness of these policies and their long-term sustainability also contribute to uncertainty in the job market.

The pandemic has fundamentally altered the landscape of graduate employability in Malaysia, introducing complexities, uncertainties, and opportunities. This paper will attempt to provide a better understanding of the evolving dynamics of the graduates' employability post-pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Employability is the top priority for those entering the job market or seeking career advancement (Fossatti et al., 2023; Grosemans et al., 2023). Employability is not just a buzzword but a critical component of a student's education and future success (Eimer & Bohndick, 2023). Padhi and Sharma (2023) facilitated that quality job prospects are fundamental for fostering economic expansion and advancement worldwide. However, past study mentioned that the unemployment rate has taken off to nearly incredible levels due to

COVID-19 pandemic that has assaulted economies to changing degrees within ASEAN countries (Jingyi et al., 2021). Referring to Dang et al. (2023), the pandemic led to a decrease in the quality of employment, as evidenced by reduced opportunities for wage jobs, positions with contracts, and formal employment.

The stun to the work demand is reflected within the rise of retrenchment of laborers, compensation reduction, denied job offers and unpaid leave (Jingyi et al., 2021). As work losses proceed to raise in the midst of the pandemic, vulnerable workers such as those working under informal divisions, self-employed workers, gig laborers, migrant workforce, and micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are confronting an intense work showcase, additionally at risk of losing livelihood due to lockdown and isolation policies (Jingyi et al., 2021). These working classes have a more noteworthy issue as they are less secured by social security schemes and other forms of wage smoothing, driving to their susceptibility to the pandemic (Jingyi et al., 2021). In transport and telecommunications sectors, Štalmachová (2021) revealed from a survey that, the employees undeniably confronted the situation of reduced benefits and wages as the result of pandemic interruption.

The rapidity of change in the labor market is indeed causing a substantial influence on the configuration and demands placed on higher education business programs (Bennett et al., 2022). Liang et al. (2022) mentions that the contraction of workforce demand in the country such as China to be the key source of the COVID-19 influence. According to Liang et al. (2022), there were disparities in the nature of the effects in terms of several distinct angles. For instance, being located in a high-intensity county had a comparatively more detrimental effect on the monthly income of male graduates (relative to female graduates), which arises the graduates' wages disparities issue.

As agreed by Rahman et al. (2022), this study stated that the issue of underemployment and labour mismatch are transverse in Malaysia: Firstly, organizations are capable to search for their prospective labor force both locally and abroad as the outcome of economic rapid globalization; Secondly, the rising trend of graduates' underemployment is also due to a deduction of skilled job vacancies under unfavorable pandemic; Thirdly, technological upgrades has led the structural alteration of employment opportunities, where abundance jobs are becoming obsolete and can be replaceable by automated system. Being other challenges, Mezhoudi et al. (2021) insisted that the gender of students and their performance in core IT courses were identified as crucial determining factors for bachelor students in the IT department in the Philippines. Even so, for students who are new to working environment likely interns, Muhammad Asiff Rafani et al. (2021) claimed that those interns are scattered across Malaysia regardless of the location of their employers, and the situation is advantageous towards fresh interns when the organizations have assisted students to be prepared with the working norm.

According to Männasoo et al. (2023), the division of digital refers to description of disparities in, first, access to the virtual network and frequency of utilization, and second, proficiency in online network usage or the level of digital skills. In orthopaedic sports medicine, Peebles et al. (2023) stated that it is crucial to consider how the absence of opportunities beyond the surgical setting due to the COVID-19 pandemic can have adverse effects on the training of sports medicine fellows. One of the distinctive aspects of sports medicine coverage is the chance to interact with and provide care for athletes at various proficiency levels. Acquiring

the skills to effectively manage these athletes and cultivate relationships with their coaches, athletic trainers, and families is a vital skill set that is further honed during this phase of a fellow's training. Nevertheless, with the widespread cancellation of organized sporting events in the spring of 2020, spanning from high school to professional levels, fellows lost the chance to refine such skills, which cannot be acquired solely through observation and remote learning.

The employability of undergraduate students presents a shared challenge that both universities and companies need to address collaboratively (Navío-Marco et al., 2023). The aviation sector has been unfavorably impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, giving rise to challenges for students who are presently enrolled in a Bachelor of Aviation program and potentially leading to adjustments in their future career prospects (Miani et al., 2021). For aviation industry, Yiu et al. (2022) stated that it was under recession with the rapid and immense outbreak of COVID-19 under globalization, and the future young aviation professionals are possibly suffering from a 'career shock'. Yiu et al. (2022) showed that airlines during pandemic, namely Cathay Pacific and Hong Kong Airlines, have trimmed their headcounts by around 5,900 posts globally and about two-thirds respectively. Indeed, the aviation industry is critical in maintaining such a status. Yet, the suspension of the recruitment stages and internship phases might be leading to substantial interruption towards their career plan.

Previous study employed the study cycle, saying that individuals at the Bachelor and Master's levels experienced a greater impact from the pandemic compared to respondents from the top tier of university education. The abrupt shift from traditional in-person classes to online learning during the pandemic had a more pronounced effect on those at the Bachelor and Master's levels, as they typically have numerous mandatory courses, laboratory work, and practical activities, which could potentially influence their employability (Mărgărint et al., 2023).

3. Material and Method

This paper will employ a narrative review to provide a comprehensive discussion on the literatures that examine the graduates' employability challenges due to the post-pandemic crisis. According to Jahan et al. (2016), a narrative review takes a less formal approach than systematic reviews being that it does not require the presentation to be of rigorous aspect but will provide a detailed explanation.

Narrative review can provide a strong rationale of the particular topic when summarizing and discussing the existing literature. The literature may offer insights, identify trends, and discuss areas where further research is needed. Hence, the narrative reviews provide a comprehensive view of the topic by including a variety of studies, perspectives, and findings. This can smoothen the understanding of a broader context and evolution of research in respective field.

In summary, a narrative review can significantly enrich current study, by offering a comprehensive, well-informed, and contextually relevant overview of the existing research on the topic. This can improve the depth and quality of the article and make it more valuable to readers, researchers, and policymakers interested in the employability of Malaysian graduates in the post-pandemic context.

4. Challenges Faced by Graduates Entering Job Market

Research carried out by Wang et al. (2023) has outlined the occupation development specifically for post-00 university interconnecting with nine topics: Survival and Development (about experience towards choosing proper housing); Intergenerational Differences (regarding distinct of generation gap); Graduation Ceremony (related to teacher-students relationship); Volunteer Service (involving voluntary donation commitments); University Life (about students' expedition towards future); Graduation Benefits (illustrating graduates' social circle); Life Attitude (pinpointing graduates' living lifestyle or habits); Peer Anxiety (concerning fight against working tension); Rectifying The Environment (further concern housing and work with help of professional measures).

As proved by Hong et al. (2023), this finding showed that self-efficacy acts as the utmost significant predictor towards students' satisfaction with the major, followed by perceived curriculum and campus support. Supported by Kassa (2022), self-efficacy has statistically significant positive effect on the employability of business graduates because it had a positive statistically significant effect on the employability of graduates. Additionally, group assessments have been counted into the curriculum for decades, responding to employers' demands of developing employability skills in project management university graduates (Tumpa et al., 2023). Work placement learning plays a significant role in predicting students' readiness for the transition from school to work (Okolie, 2022). It also highlights that this relationship is mediated by two key factors: self-efficacy and perceived employability, and that these factors operate in a serial mediation (Okolie, 2022). Additional workable mechanism and andragogic approach are applicable to enhance higher education students' employability potential pre-graduation (Bolton-King, 2022).

The introduction of an interdisciplinary post-graduate program that attracts students from diverse backgrounds is a positive development in higher education leading to future employment. It indicates a commitment to providing a well-rounded education and preparing students for a wide range of career opportunities. By continually seeking input from students and graduates, the interdisciplinary post-graduate program can maintain its attractiveness and effectiveness, ultimately benefiting both current and future students and contributing to their success in related fields. (Striolo et al., 2023).

Mayyas and Alzoubi (2022) mentioned that graduate students deal with a variety of awareness barriers when writing manuscripts, whilst the major barrier is inadequate writing experience and training. The results highlighted that multiples students were not knowledgeable of the basic concepts to be included in each manuscript section with lacking clarity about the purpose of each section of the manuscript and the writing tense that should be applicable, students' unawareness of content to present when writing the introduction, the purpose of the results/discussion sections, and ways to do report and discussion of study results. Also, many students were neutral about questionnaire questions. Hence, Mayyas and Alzoubi (2022) found out students had a lack of knowledge related to survey questions, unclarity of the questions, or lack of students' knowledge about different formatting guidelines related to manuscript sections. In this case, Mayyas and Alzoubi (2022) finding suggested that training workshops to be among the effective interventions to improve writing skills and facilitate manuscript publication.

Menon et al. (2012) found out that those who have finished their postgraduate studies have a higher likelihood of securing employment after graduating when compared to individuals who did not pursue further education beyond their undergraduate degree. Conversely, students who have intentions of pursuing postgraduate studies are somewhat less likely to anticipate immediate employment upon the completion of their postgraduate education compared to students who do not intend to continue their education at the postgraduate level (Menon et al., 2012). This outcome implies that students often undervalue the potential advantages of a postgraduate degree in terms of its impact on employment prospects (Menon et al., 2012).

Probing into gendered prospect, Hwa (2015) claimed that the most indicating gap can be examined in the following six critical skills: commercial awareness/knowledge about the business (most significant gap), self-management, computer literacy, information retrieval, planning, and resolving conflict. One of the primary factors leading to unemployment among recent graduates is the deficiency in self-management skills. Hwa (2015) generally suggested that female students demonstrate a more precise alignment with industry priorities when ranking employability skills. Notably, female students outperformed their male counterparts in all skills, except for negotiation, planning, computer literacy, and written communication. An interesting observation is that both male and female students' rankings differed most from the industry standard in the case of a typical skill: creativity. Refrain from making short-term choices that could have detrimental consequences for the future of graduates (Luan et al., 2023).

Graduates' awareness towards preparation on aircraft careers may link with Yiu et al. (2022): Younger individuals enjoy the added benefit of an extended working lifespan, while hands-on experience holds an equivalent significance to academic knowledge. Therefore, aviation students and recent graduates should possess essential soft skills for building resilience in the face of pandemic challenges. To address the urgency of acquiring non-technical skills, including leadership, communication, language proficiency, critical thinking, and crisis management for final-year students, universities should prioritize aligning resources to provide training. Non-final-year students can also benefit from coursework that integrates high-demand skills like communication, leadership, and critical thinking. (Yiu et al., 2022).

Concerning awareness to continue studies for future prospect, higher level of studies such as Master and Ph.D. students typically draw their understanding of natural hazards from their university education, whereas younger bachelor's graduates rely more heavily on information acquired during their pre-university education years (Mărgărint et al., 2023). From Galster et al. (2023), determining the essential soft skills needed in the software industry can aid in crafting professional development programs, as well as guiding tertiary institutions. There is a contention that real-time digital labor market information sources capable of generating accurate data can enhance the precision of labor market insights.

Industry 5.0 (I5.0) is an emerging concept that builds upon the principles of Industry 4.0 but places a stronger emphasis on sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity in supply chain (SC) operations. Graduates should pay attention to I5.0 which creates manufacturing and supply chain operations that are not only technologically advanced but also resilient and inclusive. This means leveraging advanced technologies to enhance the overall sustainability and well-being of the workforce. (Karmaker et al., 2023)

The Higher Education sector is indeed confronted with a rapidly changing landscape, driven by various emerging challenges to traditional employment patterns (Herbert et al., 2020). One of the key challenges is the globalization of the labor market and the increasing competition for "location-free" professional work (Herbert et al., 2020). Research, internationalization, monetary and human resources are university attributes that benefit the graduates in a straight course and translate into university reputation that being the prime determinant for employers in determining employability (Aviso et al., 2021). Graduates who possess a high degree of competence are better equipped to handle disruptions caused by events such as changing labor processes and transitions in employment (Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2022).

5. Conclusion, Implication, and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study on the employability trends of Malaysian graduates has revealed important insights into the evolving landscape of employment in Malaysia.

Malaysian graduates confront a diverse range of challenges in the job market, from complicated job market information to automation constraint, and these challenges have been further tangled by the impact of the pandemic. It is evident that there is a pressing need for continuous skill development and upskilling to bridge the gap between Malaysian graduates' capabilities and industry requirements. Graduates should embrace adaptability and resilience as they navigate the evolving job market, understanding that employability is not static but requires ongoing development.

Educational institutions must adapt their curricula and programs to equip graduates with the skills and attributes required by the job market. This adaptation should reflect the dynamic changes in employment trends. Policymakers should consider implementing policies and initiatives that support graduates' transition into the workforce, fostering an environment conducive to their employability.

In the coming years, it is imperative that all stakeholders—graduates, educational institutions, employers, and policymakers—work collaboratively to address the challenges identified in this study. By doing so, they can enhance graduate employability, contribute to economic growth, and assure that Malaysian graduates are well-prepared to fulfill the demands of the ever-changing career landscape.

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