



ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SMES (AIJBES)

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STRATEGIC CAREER DECISION-MAKING FOR GRADUATES: FOSTERING EMPLOYABILITY ELEMENTS TO MITIGATE UNEMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 25.10.2023

Revised date: 15.11.2023

Accepted date: 21.12.2023

Published date: 28.12.2023

To cite this document:

Othman, I. W., Maidin, I., Saini, H., Mokhtar, S., Sulangi, P., & Shah, M. K. M. (2023). Strategic Career Decision-Making For Graduates: Fostering Employability Elements To Mitigate Unemployment Challenges. *Advanced International Journal of Business, Entrepreneurship and SMEs*, 5 (18), 279-310.

Abstract:

The selection and decision-making process in choosing a career pose the most significant challenge, akin to a gamble in both education and employment, whether the dream career becomes a reality or remains a mere fantasy. Recent societal debates have given rise to several issues addressed in this study, including 1. The Direction of Graduates After University Education. 2. Labor Market Development. 3. Graduate Employability, and 4. Realizing Fantasy Dreams into Reality. This literature-oriented study employs a meticulous reading technique, where the author systematically analyzes career-related articles selected to address the four highlighted issues. The research findings indicate that the accurate selection of a career aligned with one's qualifications, interests, and personality is crucial, not only in determining an individual's life direction but also in realizing their career aspirations. The correlation between dream careers and suitable candidates is undeniable, particularly concerning favorable labor market trends that assist graduates in achieving their coveted careers. However, maintaining a robust labor market is no easy feat for any country facing external and internal conflicts. As we are aware, graduates must not only compete among local labor but also contend with foreign labor entering the country seeking employment. Consequently, Higher Education

DOI: 10.35631/AIJBES.518024.

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Institutions (HEIs) have undergone educational transformations to best equip graduates in fostering employability elements to combat unemployment issues. Various solutions have been implemented to achieve the discussed goals, aiming to enhance individuals, including graduates, to elevate the quality of their qualifications and instill essential soft skills crucial in the job market. Career aspirations related to the issues individuals face in determining their careers, coupled with providing solutions to reduce unemployment rates, contribute to fostering high-quality graduates.

Keywords:

Graduates, Labor Market And Employability, Dream Career

Introduction

Dream careers are the aspirations of every individual, particularly university students. A dream career is a beautiful vision to be pursued, ensuring returns on the investment made in education. Graduates' careers are crucial for ensuring their desired direction. This paper discusses several factors and issues faced by graduates in making career choices, often a problem among those confused about their life careers. Additionally, the issue of labor market development is highlighted to discuss how the labor market serves as a crucial medium in economic activities for countries worldwide. The importance of a productive labor market becomes the dream of every nation. Furthermore, the issue of graduate employability in the industry is scrutinized, considering it is a prevalent concern among both graduates and the government. This issue is intricately linked to various factors, including graduate employability, the availability of graduates, and the government's employment strategies. Moreover, the subsequent issue, when graduates try to turn fantasy dreams into reality, is one of the challenges faced in determining an individual's career. Choosing a dreamed-of career is a challenge for individuals, especially graduates, in making selections for their desired careers.

Issue 1: Graduates' Direction After Education

A career is not the result of a single event or choice; rather, it is a lifelong process that involves considerations of costs and risks. Careers hold not only meaning and purpose but are activities that produce something valuable, intricately intertwined with our lives. For graduates, a career encompasses the preparation before an individual engages in the workforce. The career process is a continuous one, involving individuals in a series of jobs that aid personal development, especially for graduates venturing into their chosen fields. Career choices among graduates are influenced by various factors, categorized as intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) factors, or based on an individual's locus of control (Jalalludin & Mohammed Rashid, 2018).

In this era of modernization, the rapidly evolving job market, coupled with global economic changes, intensifies the competition for jobs faced by today's graduates. Presently, industries demand more than just academic qualifications. This phenomenon poses a challenge to the nation's higher education sector, as the job market competition differs from the past—only graduates with skills and confidence can seize employment opportunities (Othman, Mokhtar & Esa, 2022a).

Currently, unemployment among graduates has become an issue not only in Malaysia but globally. High unemployment rates among young graduates facing difficulties securing their first jobs can have negative consequences, impacting both employees and the national economy (Lee & Mansur, 2022). Most graduates completing their studies in Higher Education

Institutions (HEIs) naturally expect to secure jobs aligned with their fields of study at university. However, in reality, not all graduates are fortunate, facing challenges in obtaining desired employment due to factors such as job scarcity, inadequate rewards, external factors, family-related motivations or obstacles, among others. Therefore, making suitable career choices is one of the most significant issues for adolescents in Malaysia (Sheik Salem et al., 2018). Career choices indicate that individuals have undergone a decision-making process, reviewing job sectors, mastering required competencies, and forming opinions about what brings satisfaction in fulfilling their chosen profession. Errors and missteps in careers, such as engaging in corruption due to low salaries, can have lasting consequences and repercussions throughout one's life (Othman, Mokhtar & Esa, 2022b). Hence, making the right career choice aligned with qualifications, interests, and personality is crucial in determining an individual's life direction. Individuals, especially graduates, venturing into various fields, must possess characteristics suitable for their career choices.

Issue 2: Labor Market Development

The career issue is intricately linked to the labor market, where the rise and fall of a labor market undoubtedly affect the careers of individuals, especially the graduate population. It is well-known that the labor market exhibits trends of growth, decline, or inconsistency, serving as a benchmark for labor market development. Malaysia's labor market has indeed progressed similarly to other advanced nations such as Singapore, Thailand, Australia, and many more. Although not yet on par with the labor market of the United States, Japan, or China, it cannot be denied that its labor market productivity surpasses that of other less-developed nations (Yusof, Jamaluddin & Mat Lazim, 2013). The average standard of living and cost of living in society is moderate, neither too advanced nor regressive. Consequently, in this context, it is evident that Malaysia's labor market is developing. However, beneath this development lies sorrowful tales, especially during the decline caused by the widespread COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a severe economic downturn globally. The world economy faced alarming challenges, resulting in an increased unemployment rate, particularly among graduates (Othman, Mokhtar & Pullong, 2022c).

Nevertheless, as the world economy gradually recovers approaching 2022, including Malaysia's economic sector, the impact is still observable. Unemployment statistics are slowly decreasing. In another context, despite the growing labor market, it does not imply that local citizens are reaping the same benefits. As widely acknowledged, cross-border immigration has become common in Malaysia, with immigrants coming to the country for work. Among the countries sending the most immigrants are Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Mohd Palel, Ismail & Awang, 2014). Undoubtedly, they contribute to the development of Malaysia's labor market and play a significant role in the country's economic growth in manufacturing, agriculture, and plantation sectors. Immigrants working in Malaysia consist of both skilled and unskilled labor, with foreign workers in high demand among employers in Malaysia. This arises due to their lower wage demands compared to local workers. Furthermore, they are less selective about jobs and work solely to sustain their lives by earning wages in Malaysia. Therefore, employers prefer hiring them to save on production costs. However, this has negative implications for local citizens, especially graduates.

Graduates are individuals who have completed their education at an ivory tower with a higher educational background. However, graduates often face the issue of unemployment when the labor market experiences a downturn or is monopolized by foreign labor. Each graduate undoubtedly dreams of an ideal career from school to graduation, harboring high expectations

due to the efforts and dedication shown during their academic journey. However, the increasing issue of graduate unemployment causes concern about facing such a nightmare. Various efforts have been implemented by graduates, universities, the government, and parents alike. However, the problem of graduate unemployment still prevails today. Consequently, the dream job remains a fantasy rather than a reality.

Issue 3: Graduate Employability in The Industry

The realm of employment and graduates is an inseparable entity. This is because, upon the completion of their studies, graduates inevitably seek employment, either in their field of interest or merely to meet their needs. As observed among graduates, not all can pursue their dream careers due to the abundance of graduates in a particular field, intensifying the competition for coveted positions. Consequently, many graduates from Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (IPT) find it challenging to turn their dream jobs into reality, often rendering them mere fantasies (Abdullah & Abd Majid, 2022). Consequently, graduate employability takes center stage in this issue, determining their eligibility to work in a specific field.

Graduate employability encompasses various crucial aspects such as academic qualifications, experience, and soft skills. These attributes form part of a graduate's personality and are assessed by employers and the public before venturing into their desired fields of work. This is because the working world is full of challenges and obstacles that demand physical and mental resilience from graduates.

In light of this, graduates must prepare themselves physically and mentally to face the practical and serious challenges of the working world. Employers evaluate required aspects to ensure the quality of graduates and their suitability for positions within the industry. Some positions not only emphasize academic qualifications but also require high soft skills or an appealing personality to attract the public's interest, benefiting the organization (Norman et al., 2017). Thus, the working world emphasizes not only academics but also highlights the importance of soft skills, making a graduate's employability even more significant.

It is common knowledge that pursuing dreams or aspirations has been envisioned by graduates since their school days. Therefore, the quality of graduates should be enhanced, and existing talents should be polished to increase their employability in the industry. However, as 2020 approached, the Covid-19 pandemic took over almost every country, causing Malaysia's economy to plummet and resulting in economic deflation with high unemployment rates due to layoffs in various economic sectors (Abdul Aziz, 2020). The economic sector's failure to operate during the pandemic shifted a portion of its operations from physical to online. This triggered and accelerated the changes of the Fourth Industrial Revolution after the pandemic, where post-Covid-19 economic recovery displayed widespread and easy adoption of online practices by various countries and industries in the economic sector (Lai & Aziz, 2019).

In this context, graduates must enhance their employability required in the industrial sector to adapt to the economic changes towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution and secure a place in the job market. Therefore, evaluating graduate employability from various aspects is crucial in improving a graduate's quality to turn their coveted job into a reality.

Issue 4: Transforming Fantastical Dreams into Reality

The pursuit of one's dream career stands as a central objective within society, serving as a long-term source of livelihood. This is particularly true for the cohort of graduates who have recently concluded their studies at the ivory tower level. The reason behind this is that the chosen dream career profoundly shapes an individual's life success, necessitating concerted efforts to bring it to fruition. Broadly speaking, before an individual embarks on the journey to actualize their dream career, several factors merit careful consideration due to the prevailing employment issues in society.

To date, the nation grapples with a dilemma as the will of employers to bring someone into their company becomes challenging, especially when they harbor doubts about the skills, particularly among recent graduates who have just completed their studies at the tertiary level. This concern often becomes a focal point of discussion in forums involving employers (Ali et al., 2018). As a crucial preparatory step for realizing one's dream career, individuals must possess profound knowledge across various aspects. In-depth knowledge stands out as a paramount factor in transforming the dream career into reality. Social skills also emerge as a pivotal aspect warranting attention. Competencies such as communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities are deemed indispensable. Employers often prioritize and value candidates with such proficiencies, making recent graduates, who have recently completed their studies, promising contenders for dream careers that demand these specific skill sets.

In another context, aspiring for a dream career mandates individuals to fortify their identity when entering their chosen field. This is due to the intense competition arising not only from the general populace but also from graduates adequately equipped with skills and knowledge acquired during their tertiary education (Mohd Ishar & Ismail, 2020). Additionally, thorough research can confer a competitive advantage in realizing a dream career, as the supplementary information obtained proves invaluable, especially concerning prospective employers. This situation provides a comprehensive picture and exposes individuals to evaluate their capabilities in pursuing a dream career, necessitating adequate preparation to compete with those possessing potential in the career landscape.

The career landscape is inherently challenging, particularly when aiming for a desired dream career. Nevertheless, with sufficient preparation, individuals can address and overcome prevalent career issues within society, aiding them in readiness to confront the challenges encountered while shaping their trajectory into the workforce or actualizing their dream careers.

Literature Review

The career selection process, resembling a gamble in education and employment, constitutes a critical challenge, determining whether one's dream career materializes or remains a fantasy. Societal debates have fueled discussions in this study, focusing on issues that relate to the direction of graduates after university education, labor market development, and graduate employability. Utilizing a meticulous reading technique, this literature-oriented study systematically analyzes career-related articles, providing insights into the complexities surrounding graduates' career choices and the evolving landscape of the labor market. The study aims to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality in career pursuits, shedding light on the challenges graduates face in navigating the intricate career landscape.

Issue 1: Post-Learning Graduates' Trajectory

Career selection is a pivotal aspect of an individual's life, holding the promise of a comfortable future by ensuring a substantial income. Consequently, career choices implicitly require factors that can influence one's ability to choose a profession that aligns with their identity. This underscores the significance of career selection, especially for our postgraduate students. Michael Borchect's (2002) study identified several career factors influencing choices, such as personality, environment, and opportunities (Sheik Salem et al., 2018). The study findings highlighted that all three factors influence career choices, with personality being the most dominant (Jalalludin & Mohammed Rashid, 2018).

Referring to the speech by Malaysia's Minister of Higher Education, Dato' Seri Mohamad Khaled Bin Nordin, dated December 4, 2012, it is asserted that Malaysia's progress requires the engagement of all available potential among its people, whether at a high intellectual or high-skilled level (Abd. Majid & Hussin, 2015). As the nation's primary talent pool, graduates produced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must possess attributes that make them marketable. However, universities are not merely institutions developing graduates for industrial and economic purposes; they bear the greater responsibility of nation-building (Abd. Majid & Hussin, 2015).

The rising unemployment phenomenon in Malaysia, particularly due to a surplus of graduates unable to secure employment matching their educational qualifications, raises concerns (Mohd Othman & Abdul Mutalib & Manjamain, 2020). Unemployment among our graduates persists despite their several years of completing higher education. Many remain jobless not due to a lack of opportunities but possibly because the available roles don't align with their expectations. The issue intensifies as these graduates continue seeking positions that they deem suitable for their university-level qualifications. Issues regarding graduates' career paths also touch upon the concept of "interest" in their chosen professions. The importance of "interest" in a job is emphasized, as it reflects a mindset that avoids unconventional prerequisites, making job hunting more challenging (Mohd Ishar & Ismail, 2020).

Career changes among graduates are not solely driven by a lack of interest. Instead, they often stem from factors like career advancement opportunities and positions that offer higher monthly incomes than their previous roles. Moreover, interest plays a crucial role in enabling graduates to gain experience and hone skills while familiarizing themselves with a chosen career path. A genuine interest contributes to positive attitudes, fostering success in one's professional journey (Abdul Rauf & Abdul Rauf, 2012). Among the influencing factors on graduates' career success is technical skills, encompassing the ability to apply specific expertise or knowledge according to procedures in fields like engineering, accounting, or finance. Proficiency in technical and vocational skills is crucial for attracting foreign investors to Malaysia, with a lack of these skills identified as a primary cause of graduate unemployment (Ali et al., 2018).

Hashim, Chang & Abd. Rahman's (2016) study reports that many unemployed graduates attribute their situation to their own attitudes. This is further acknowledged by the Malaysian Bumiputera Women Entrepreneurs and Professionals Association (Peniagawati), stating that graduates often choose jobs based on their perceived alignment with their qualifications (Mohd Othman & Abdul Mutalib & Manjamain, 2020). This perspective is supported by the Ministry of Finance Malaysia's Communication Unit (KKM), stating that being too selective in job choices contributes to the rising unemployment rate in Malaysia (Mohd Othman & Abdul

Mutalib & Manjamain, 2020). Graduates may avoid jobs categorized as the three “Ds”: Dangerous, Dirty, and Difficult, adding complexity to the job search (Mohd Shah et al., 2021).

Another significant issue is the failure to master the English language, identified as a cause of graduate unemployment. Weak English proficiency among Malaysian graduates leads to reduced confidence in interactions, causing them to withdraw (Ismail, 2012). Graduates need to improve their English proficiency to enhance their employability. The government must elevate educational standards and promote the importance of the English language among graduates, ensuring that this issue doesn't persist in the future.

Moreover, graduates must communicate wisely and exude confidence when interacting with others. Having been nurtured with Soft Skills at university, graduates are well-equipped for the workforce. Beyond academic excellence, mastering Soft Skills is a bonus for graduates seeking employment in any organization. Educators play a crucial role in ensuring effective implementation of communication modules to cultivate awareness among graduates, aligning with public speaking modules (Abd. Majid & Hussin, 2015).

Furthermore, labor market issues pose a significant and challenging problem from a perspective. To build a robust economy, all stakeholders must be involved. However, mitigating problems can be challenging. Addressing graduate unemployment requires industry participation in producing employable graduates. On the demand side, economic growth support becomes difficult due to government planning challenges, involving economic planners (Abd. Majid & Hussin, 2015).

To avoid graduates relying solely on job opportunities post-graduation, the introduction of entrepreneurship as a mandatory elective subject in all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country is imperative. Continued application of entrepreneurial skills can indirectly create a pool of graduates knowledgeable in business, opening new employment opportunities and subsequently boosting the country's economic growth (Othman et al., 2022d). A thriving economy will generate numerous job opportunities in Malaysia. Consequently, addressing the graduate adjustment issue and the impact of the job market's job openings can alleviate challenges faced by graduates in Malaysia.

Issue 2: Labor Market Development

The evolution of a productive labor market is an aspiration shared by every nation, given that the economic activities of any country are intricately tied to the development of its labor market. This underscores the paramount importance of labor market advancement for every country, prompting numerous researchers to undertake comprehensive studies in this domain. The impact of globalization on labor demand in selected service subsectors in Malaysia exemplifies how the contemporary currents of globalization have catalyzed developments in the labor market (Zainal Abidin & Ismail & Sulaiman, 2011). The implications of globalization on the economy of each country unfold as the economic market expands, resulting in an escalating demand for labor across various economic sectors.

An analysis derived from this study posits a positive correlation between globalization and the demand for labor in selected service subsectors in Malaysia. However, despite the positive trajectory in the labor market, negative implications persist due to the influx of foreign labor. The heightened standard of living, infrastructural facilities, and attractive wages offered within the country allure foreign nationals to work as laborers, leading to unintended repercussions.

The impact of the influx of foreign labor on the productivity of the manufacturing sector in Malaysia indicates a correlation between the effects of foreign labor presence and its repercussions on the local economy and labor market (Mohd Palel, Ismail & Awang, 2014). For instance, the effects on local employment opportunities can be either positive or negative, contingent upon whether foreign labor serves as substitutes or complements to local workers. Despite the crucial importance of skills in an individual's employability, employers in Malaysia place a higher emphasis on a worker's experience.

This intricately connects with the employability of graduates from higher education institutions in Malaysia, where issues and strategies revolve around concerns within the graduate community. The reduction in the unemployment rate is directly associated with an increase in age. As the labor force ages, the unemployment rate decreases. Graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are typically younger and less experienced compared to the older workforce. Employers tend to favor older workers due to their wealth of experience, particularly in problem-solving situations. This dynamic results in a short-term increase in the unemployment rate (Abdullah & Abd Majid, 2022).

Conversely, some local employers exhibit a preference for hiring foreign workers over locals due to various factors, including the prevailing wage dilemma (Mohamed, Ajis & Md. Zain, 2019). Local citizens perceive jobs in the 3D sector (Dangerous, Dirty, and Difficult) as offering low and disproportionate wages. Consequently, employers feel compelled to hire foreign workers to fill existing vacancies. Moreover, many foreign workers are willing to work overtime and accept lower wages compared to local workers. This scenario prompts employers to choose and remunerate foreign workers over their local counterparts.

It is a well-known fact that graduates, with their high academic backgrounds, expect lucrative returns in their dream careers. However, when the local labor market increasingly opts for foreign labor, the job opportunities for graduates diminish. This imbalance is exacerbated by the impact of educational inflation, where individuals with higher education levels find it easier to secure jobs with substantial and secure incomes (Osman & Shahir, 2013). Paradoxically, excessive investment in education not only adds to the pool of educated unemployed but also generates job mismatches as individuals accept positions below their qualifications.

Furthermore, the issue of discrimination emerges within the labor market, becoming a prominent topic of discussion. Instances of discrimination against mid to low-income groups in employment have been identified (Othman, 2012). Gender-related factors also contribute to job discrimination, predominantly affecting women, who are often perceived as less physically capable than their male counterparts. The lack of educated female workers can be traced back to workplace discrimination, causing many women to either quit or fail to secure employment (Othman, Zakaria & Esa, 2022). Additionally, racial discrimination plays a role, with some workers exhibiting racist behavior towards those from different ethnic backgrounds.

In essence, graduates face challenges in securing employment due to various factors contributing to unemployment. Consequently, their dream careers become elusive fantasies rather than tangible realities.

Issue 3: Employability of Graduates in the Industry

The high employability of graduates is often the primary objective for individuals bearing the title of graduate and is, in fact, a national expectation. Graduates are considered a cornerstone

of the nation in propelling it towards enhanced competitiveness globally. This is because graduates play a crucial role in ensuring the stability of the country's economy across various industrial sectors. The issue of a graduate's personality, which serves as an attraction for organizations, is linked to the demands of the current era of globalization. It no longer emphasizes only technical skills but also underscores soft skills, particularly the personality traits that make graduates appealing to employers (Norman et al., 2017). Factors such as a graduate's personality, viewed through the eyes of employers, including attitudes, leadership, and communication skills, become significant considerations. These aspects often serve as compelling features for employers, as graduates exhibiting uniqueness and proficiency in these areas are more likely to influence employers to offer their coveted positions.

Subsequently, the employability of graduates, leveraging these valuable assets, propels them to higher echelons in the industrial market. However, the adage "looks can be deceiving" often rings true in the context of graduate employment. This is stated thus because while most graduates may possess high academic qualifications, not all inherit the emphasized personality traits. A focus on these aspects is crucial to enhance graduates' personalities, and efforts should begin as early as in schools. Furthermore, Ahmad et al. (2014) explain that social and academic skills are closely related aspects in determining an individual graduate's employability in the industry. This underscores the importance for universities and graduates themselves to be aware of the current industry requirements, which demand both social skills and high knowledge levels before venturing into the workforce.

Issues concerning graduates and employment are related to a job market considered more dynamic due to changes in technology use in industries and unemployment resulting from economic development not aligning with the production of graduates (Yussof, Ismail & Sidin, 2008).

It is widely acknowledged that the job market is fraught with challenges requiring resilience and high adaptability from graduates. In this context, the dream careers envisioned by graduates become increasingly difficult to attain and highly competitive. Unbeknownst to many, these dream careers undergo rapid changes with technological advancements and the country's progress. Consequently, intense competition arises among graduates vying for their desired positions. Graduates exhibit various efforts and uniqueness to showcase their abilities and stand out, making them suitable for and capable of achieving their dream careers. Through this study, it is evident that while graduates actively enhance their employability, economic performance issues arise, impacting a significant number who cannot realize their envisioned careers. This problem intensifies as the economic environment struggles to generate ample employment opportunities across diverse industry sectors for graduates.

The employability and unemployment of graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have seen a sudden increase. This situation arises from graduates' inability to secure desired jobs and their selective approach to industrial positions. The challenge becomes more daunting with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which struck almost every country around 2020. Economic downturn during the pandemic led to various issues related to unemployment faced by graduates and the nation. The economic difficulties during the pandemic made it challenging to find jobs, resulting in layoffs across various economic sectors. Graduates were compelled to engage in various types of jobs, such as becoming riders or starting small businesses, and were willing to fill existing job vacancies, even if these were not their dream careers (Abd. Majid & Hussin, 2015).

Perceptions of students regarding the employability of graduates in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution prove that the transition to this era has triggered unemployment issues. Some graduates find it challenging to adapt to industrial changes, leading to their displacement from sectors that have adopted advanced technologies. Additionally, the use of sophisticated technology has replaced many positions or roles that were traditionally handled by humans. As a result, the demand for labor from graduates has diminished due to the use of advanced and modern machine technology, which saves energy, time, and production costs. Consequently, the employability of graduates is tested in terms of their ability to understand, use, and master current technological skills for future competitiveness. If graduates can dominate these technological skills, their employability becomes significantly high, allowing them to be offered positions in various industries and making it easier to turn their dream careers into reality (Lai & Aziz, 2019).

Therefore, in navigating the current era of globalization, education undoubtedly plays a crucial role for graduates, demanding them to strive for aspirations that go beyond mere rhetoric. This is because the formation of a graduate begins not at the university level but starts from home, emphasizing the significant role parents play in shaping the qualities and characteristics of future graduates. The Ministry of Education and the teaching fraternity should play a major role in producing outstanding graduates from various aspects, enabling them to make a mark on the global stage. In conclusion, the employability of graduates is an issue that needs to be understood and enhanced before stepping into the workforce. This is because the evolving and revolutionizing job market requires a high level of technical and soft skills from graduates. Consequently, intense competition arises, and graduates need to showcase all their strengths and abilities to pursue their dream careers and turn them into reality, not just fantasies (Mohd Puad & Mad Nawe, 2021).

Issue 4: Turning Fantasy Dreams into Reality in Career Development

The evolution of the job market in the present era can be described as increasingly challenging over time. For instance, many individuals, especially recent graduates completing their university studies, hold varying perspectives on the employability skills required in the current job market. Despite most universities or higher education institutions incorporating employability skills development, many employers report that graduates are not yet prepared for the workforce and lack many essential skills needed in the professional realm (Tymon, 2013).

Furthermore, achieving one's dream career also demands individuals to possess strong work capabilities and an attitude acceptable to employers. This is evident in observing how students transition from higher education to the labor market, constructing, understanding, and initiating the development of their employability. This orientation influences how students approach work and their dream careers through the development of ideal-type models. This provides an insight into how an individual can demonstrate commitment to a job after completing their studies and pursuing their dream careers for a brighter future. It also evaluates students' perceptions of how they view the job market from their perspective, understanding the field they intend to make their dream career and ensuring it becomes a reality, thereby addressing employment issues and overcoming challenges (Tomlinson, 2007).

However, issues such as unemployment remain a significant concern among society, and recent graduates are a group found to be disproportionately unemployed. This is due to several factors, including concerns related to the actual employability perspective of graduates in Malaysia.

Unemployment among graduates in Malaysia cannot be taken lightly, as it is feared to exacerbate other social phenomena. This is a highly perilous issue for society, as graduates should ideally be role models contributing to the community. Unfortunately, the reality is often different. Nevertheless, some graduates are observed making efforts to gather information about graduate employability. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of Institutions, the government, and other organizations to provide relevant Information as guidance, ensuring that the knowledge gained during their academic journey is not in vain. This way, graduates can apply their acquired skills to assist others in the community, elevating the country's reputation in advancing employability in various career fields (Hashim, 2018).

In conclusion, in the pursuit of one's dream career, individuals must emphasize several factors before competing with a larger pool of potential candidates. The rapid pace of the job market, demanding quality manpower, coupled with employers seeking individuals capable of benefiting the company and fostering a positive work environment for an extended period, requires individuals to showcase their skills. This not only positions them as examples for others but also contributes to sustained efforts and development for a progressive future.

Methodology

In essence, this study prioritizes a qualitative approach using literature sources obtained from the internet as the primary instrument. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research involves the use of scientific methods to reveal a phenomenon by describing data and facts through words holistically to the study subjects. This qualitative research employs scientific methods to expose a phenomenon by describing data and facts through words holistically to the study subjects. Qualitative research data is descriptive, in the form of interview notes, observation records, document reviews, and the data is analyzed inductively (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Simons (2009) supports this, stating that qualitative methods emphasize meaning production to understand social phenomena, taking into account untouched aspects such as individuals' perspectives and idiosyncrasies.

The data obtained through qualitative methods are descriptive, aligning with the recorded data in the article. Finally, after completing the recording and analyzing of all obtained data, the comprehensive analysis indicates that the primary influencing factor is the interest factor, as documented in the article discussing the factors influencing career choices among graduates in Malaysia.

Discussion: Issues And Challenges

The study underscores the challenges of accurately aligning one's career with qualifications, interests, and personality, impacting life direction and career aspirations. The undeniable link between dream careers and suitable candidates gains significance amid favorable labor market trends, aiding graduates in pursuing desired professions. However, maintaining a robust labor market poses challenges for countries facing external and internal conflicts. Graduates contend not only locally but also with foreign labor seeking employment. Consequently, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) transform education to equip graduates with employability elements, addressing unemployment challenges. Solutions aim to enhance individuals, including graduates, improving qualifications, and instilling crucial soft skills for the job market. The study aligns career aspirations with challenges in career determination, offering solutions to reduce unemployment rates and foster high-quality graduates.

Issue 1: Post-Learning Career Directions

Career, being integral to individual development, signifies a continuous journey interlinked with experiences and attitudes shaping one's life. Graduates completing their studies in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) naturally anticipate securing employment aligned with their field of study at the university. However, the reality is that not all graduates are fortunate in attaining the desired jobs due to various factors, including job scarcity, inadequate rewards, familial influences, and more. Hence, it is crucial for individuals to be career-aware post-education. Yet not all career choices stem solely from the graduates' internal decisions; various issues influence career selection.

One such issue is the "interest" factor, crucial in a graduate's career path. Interest plays a pivotal role in job satisfaction and the determination to excel. Career transitions among graduates are not solely driven by disinterest but are influenced by factors such as promotions and career opportunities with higher monthly incomes. There is only one job in the surveyed data representing 1% of the total career choices that a graduate finds uninteresting. Moreover, interest is essential for graduates to gain experience and hone skills in their chosen careers, fostering positive attitudes towards career success. This issue has prompted graduates to contemplate career choices post-higher education (Mohd Ishar & Ismail, 2020).

Career selection is a vital aspect of an individual's life, with a well-chosen career providing comfort and assurance of a secure future with a good income. Therefore, career choices indirectly necessitate influencing factors to enable individuals to select careers suitable for them. Factors influencing career selection include personality, environment, and opportunities (Norman et al., 2017). The institution's family phenomenology, interpreting and giving meaning to life experiences, determines adaptive abilities in various life aspects (Mohd Shah et al., 2021b). The environmental and family factors significantly impact career choices among students aged 19-24 years, still reliant on parental assistance for decision-making. Parental support and involvement affect graduates' career choices, and lack thereof can hinder graduates from making informed career decisions.

Moreover, the rapidly evolving job market, coupled with global economic changes, intensifies competition for graduates to secure employment. Employers now prioritize candidates with high employability skills, not solely academic qualifications (Mohd Makhbul, Yussof & Awang, 2015). Employability, intertwined with interpersonal skills, becomes a prerequisite for graduates to adapt to the workforce. Self-confidence, reflecting one's belief in managing life effectively and overcoming challenges successfully, is crucial. Therefore, the lack of self-confidence among graduates becomes a contributing factor to their career indecision. Unemployment issues among graduates are not solely influenced by employability factors but also by other contributors.

Unemployment phenomena in the country result from an excess supply of labor compared to the demand in the job market. The mismatch of learned skills with industry needs is a prevalent cause of graduate unemployment. This discrepancy encompasses various dimensions, including the balance between fields of study, technical and generic skills, and theoretical and practical aspects of education and training. As Malaysia moves towards building a world-class education system embracing the knowledge economy, three main factors contribute to graduate unemployment: graduate demand and supply, job search processes, and skill mismatch (Vestergaard et al., 2007). In the current economic context, labor demand and supply dynamics shape the learning transfer process. Communication proficiency has become a necessity for

graduates, evident in the career context as educators. As communication plays a vital role in the career realm, graduates need to master this skill.

Presently, proficiency in English provides a competitive advantage to prospective employees. Although native language skills symbolize national solidarity, mastery of English is essential in the current era of globalization (Othman et al., 2021a). English is widely used in private sectors, irrespective of the country's developmental status, and has become the lingua franca for cross-border communication. Graduates' failure to master English has led to a decline in their confidence when interacting with others, hindering their active participation. Employers emphasize English proficiency, considering it a vital skill (Mohd Othman, Abdul Mutalib & Manjamain, 2020). Weaknesses in English proficiency have been identified as a significant factor, with 64% contributing to graduates' job market challenges (Mohd Othman & Abdul Mutalib & Manjamain, 2020). In a private sector that interacts globally, English proficiency is crucial for effective communication and collaboration.

Soft skills, encompassing generic skills across various learning domains, including personality and teamwork, are considered crucial by employers. While most employers recognize graduates' academic achievements, the lack of soft skills is a prevalent issue. Consequently, Malaysian employers often prioritize candidates with excellent academic achievements and essential soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, and flexibility.

Unemployment is further exacerbated by graduates possessing skills misaligned with the applied job positions. Graduates with high academic qualifications in specific fields often apply for jobs outside their expertise, contributing to unemployment issues. Educational factors play a role in unemployment, as employers frequently rely on academic achievements before scheduling interviews. Graduates are often evaluated on multiple aspects during interviews, including attitude, confidence levels, and effective communication skills, leading to employment difficulties (Baharin, Yussof & Ismail, 2012).

Furthermore, not all graduates possess knowledge of personal appearance and interview etiquette. Personal hygiene becomes a primary aspect for interviewers to assess an individual's personality and attitude. Lack of awareness in these areas has led to many graduates failing to project a professional image, hindering their chances of securing desired employment. Finally, the influx of non-citizens into Malaysia, with or without permits and valid documents, has created job market competition among graduates. As of June 2017, immigration statistics reported 1,781,598 legal foreign workers in the country, hailing from various countries (Mohd Othman & Abdul Mutalib & Manjamain, 2020). This data does not account for the presence of undocumented foreign workers within the country. The aforementioned factors collectively contribute to post-education career challenges for graduates.

Issue 2: Labor Market Development

Graduates will indeed become one of the labor forces, regardless of whether they are skilled or unskilled labor. Estimated annually, the statistics on graduates entering the labor force exhibit inconsistent trends, particularly in the current era of globalization, where issues arising in the labor market development are increasingly alarming. This has a negative impact on graduates as they are forced to confront the primary issue in the country, namely "Unemployment," with the estimated unemployment rate reaching 4.2 percent of the population in December 2021. Not only that, but there are also graduates working below their qualifications, with

approximately 1.9 million recorded as of February 2021 (Abdullah & Abd Majid, 2022). Undoubtedly, this issue becomes a nightmare for every graduate in pursuing their dream careers.

Viewing from a different perspective, graduate employability and competition in the job market have led to the longstanding problem of unemployment. This issue has not only become recurrent but has also attracted the interest of many researchers to investigate and identify the root causes. One of the major contributing factors is the lack of skills or potential in terms of employability and job readiness possessed by graduates, making it challenging for them to secure their dream careers. Furthermore, a mismatch between the quality of graduates and the labor market needs, especially in terms of skills and knowledge possessed by postgraduates, has led to unemployment issues. In this decade, the mismatch of jobs and educational inflation has added various career-related issues (Osman & Shahir, 2013).

It is widely acknowledged that the government has strengthened various educational efforts to ensure the quality of the country's education remains at the highest and most qualitative level. However, excessive investment has led to educational inflation, with the return on investment lower than expected, resulting in unemployment or job mismatch faced by graduates. While graduates may have had dreams when pursuing higher education, the rapid pace and economic imbalances have shattered those dreams upon graduating. This is a consequence of intense competition in the industry, making it difficult for graduates to secure jobs simultaneously exhibiting a selective attitude.

In this post-independence era, despite the country's development and diplomatic ties with advanced nations, concerns arise as educated labor force growth does not align with the number of available jobs. One contributing factor is the shortage of educated and skilled female labor. Married women face challenges in balancing their careers and families, leading some to abandon their career dreams and focus solely on their families. Moreover, some female workers perceive that, after marriage, men are the breadwinners who should work to provide for the family, while women should play the role of homemakers. Due to economic pressure, the country has established relationships with neighboring countries, importing foreign labor. For instance, Malaysia has established fraternal ties with neighboring countries such as Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and many more. This action aims to stimulate the country's economic growth and contribute to the development of the Southeast Asian economy, competing with Western countries.

Thus, the issues of foreign and local labor competing in the industry emerge. As widely known, companies prefer foreign labor due to their willingness to accept lower wages than local labor. Consequently, involved firms can save costs and maximize profits. Similarly, employers face a dilemma regarding wage disparities between foreign and local workers, sparking heated debates among the public. From the citizens' perspective, employers should not hire foreign workers as the jobs offered can be done by local citizens. Conversely, from the employers' standpoint, they are forced to do so because foreign workers are less selective and are merely seeking employment for survival. Compared to local labor, foreign workers are less inclined to engage in 3D job sectors ("Dirty, Dangerous, Difficult"), but they have maximum salary demands disproportionate to the returns to the company.

The labor market is also subject to discrimination, often observed in gender and income aspects (Othman, 2012). In terms of gender, women are frequently perceived as easy targets by some

men who consider women weak both physically and mentally. As a result, job opportunities for women are said to be more open in entrepreneurial fields involving small businesses (Topimin, Othman, Hassan, and Ahmad, 2021). Due to these perceptions, many companies have rejected women from working in their companies, believing that women are not qualified in terms of strength and skills compared to men. In terms of income, as known, there is income disparity for each type of job based on their respective skills. However, certain jobs that do not emphasize skills and competency but rely solely on appearance receive higher income, while jobs requiring skills and competency are given lower wages. Workers receiving lower income are often stigmatized by some societies, as they believe individuals with low wages lack competence.

As time passes, the world has also been shaken by a pandemic that has disrupted the global economy, with pervasive implications worldwide, especially affecting various service sectors. For instance, among the most affected sectors due to the pandemic are aviation and tourism. The Covid-19 pandemic is not only concerning from a global health perspective but has also critically impacted the world economy, even though it has gradually recovered. The pandemic's impact continues to affect the labor market, posing a major challenge in developing leadership among the younger generation, as university closures (Ationg et al., 2021) contribute to unemployment, which often becomes a pressure in society and sometimes ends fatally, as the percentage of suicide cases in Malaysia continues to rise (Aziz @ Dorashid, 2020).

The issue of unemployment is alarming, as some businesses have to cease operations due to compliance with movement control orders declared by the government to contain the rampant spread of Covid-19 in society. Consequently, many labor forces are laid off to reduce the costs borne by the company. The implications lead to a declining labor market, and many individuals have to bear losses, including graduates. Consequently, the cost of living also increases, indirectly causing an increase in poverty rates within the country. Therefore, graduate employability to have a dream career, and not just a fantasy, can be realized by developing effective strategies. Institutions should play a crucial role in shaping human capital, allowing graduates to strengthen their interpersonal skills, humane skills, and employability skills.

One strategy that should be strengthened is investing in technical and vocational education (Ali et al., 2018). In general, technical and vocational education prioritizes skills. These skills are highly sought after by employers because graduates from these institutions are talented in their chosen fields and accustomed to them, attracting many companies to hire them. Firms believe that graduates from technical and vocational institutes are deeply trained and make it easy for them to provide guidance, maximizing the profits generated by the company. Consequently, investing in technical and vocational education can provide substantial returns to the country. Therefore, graduate unemployment can be reduced, and the labor market can be developed for the economic well-being of the country.

Furthermore, as presented in Budget 2023, various dimensions will be strengthened, such as providing incentives to work and realigning the skills and competencies of the workforce to meet industry demand. This initiative is to fully support the country's economic production (Berita Harian, 2022a). Youth unemployment, graduate employability, worker protection, and talent development are among the main focuses of Budget 2023. The targeted groups are encouraged to leverage high technology by promoting digital-based growth. This effort will strengthen the highly skilled workforce while improving their standard of living. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, which has reduced the workforce in the country's economic sector,

inclusive measures that can be implemented include filling vacancies with local talent. The recruitment of workers under PERKESO can encourage employers to provide job opportunities to the disabled, indigenous people, ex-convicts, and women. Improving job matching mechanisms is crucial to reducing job search barriers.

Budget 2023 also proposes the establishment of MYFutureJobs Satellite Centers nationwide and a National Placement Center to help individuals find jobs more easily and quickly (Berita Harian, 2022a). Similarly, research findings indicate that Budget 2023 encompasses essential aspects in terms of labor market empowerment strategies, aligning with the 12th Malaysia Plan. For example, financing through an allocation of RM235 million can encourage more women to enhance their business capacity and improve their marketing strategies under the Semarak-Nita BSN, Tekunita TEKUN, DanaNita MARA, and Biz Lady Bank Rakyat schemes (Mohd Khalid, 2022). All these initiatives are expected to increase the participation of female labor and directly support the policy direction of Chapter 10 in the 12th Malaysia Plan concerning Future Talent Development (Mohd Khalid, 2022). Thus, these strategies can be realized to make dream of careers a reality for every individual and not just a fantasy.

Issue 3: Graduate Employability in The Industry

Graduates are considered the most important value or asset of a nation in maintaining and shaping a prestigious image globally. As a graduate, personality becomes an attraction for organizations. This is asserted because an attractive personality can influence the mindset, beliefs, and trust of an organization (Norman et al., 2017). Personality is also associated with emotions and behavior when dealing with individuals in various situations. For example, a graduate who can make wise and calm decisions in challenging situations will provide a high and attractive perspective and response from the organization towards that graduate. In the present time, employers not only require technical skills but also prioritize attractive personalities as they can positively impact the organization in attracting the interest and attention of customers. Furthermore, most employers emphasize high interpersonal skills such as teamwork, personality, self-confidence, and communication abilities, given the prevalence of social media and the internet in contemporary jobs. Although academic qualifications are still emphasized in the job market, an attractive personality displayed by a graduate can to some extent help them secure desired employment. The availability of job opportunities in the industry requires graduates to meet high qualifications and criteria to achieve their desired career goals. Each graduate should also be aware of the needs and demands of the job market offered by firms.

Therefore, graduates need to refine their personalities to be more attractive, outstanding, and dynamic, making it easier for them to be accepted or to attain the desired job. Furthermore, a study conducted by Ahmad et al. (2014) highlights that social and academic skills, as well as the employability of graduates in the industry, are often hot topics among graduates. In reviewing this topic, social and academic skills are two distinct aspects. This is because not all graduates have skills in both aspects. Some graduates excel in social or academic skills only. Graduates who excel in social skills find it easier to communicate and interact with others but may lack knowledge in job-related matters. On the contrary, graduates with excellent academic skills have broad and genius thinking in a subject but may be hesitant or shy to communicate with others. Both aspects are crucial and serve as benchmarks set by the industry for graduates entering the job market. However, some graduates excel in both aspects, making it easy for them to adapt to the work environment, resulting in high employability in both the public and private sectors.

Furthermore, according to Sahid & A. Hamid (2019), graduate employability can also be enhanced through employability skills. Employability Skills (ES) refers to the ability of graduates to complete various assigned tasks. This is essential in efforts to improve employability and prepare each graduate before entering the job market. In this context, employability not only focuses on academics but also emphasizes employability skills, which are crucial in the current era filled with competition among graduates. There are also employability assessment instruments conducted to evaluate graduates' employability skills. However, employability skills cover a wide range of aspects, including technical skills, interpersonal skills, and general knowledge, making it challenging to determine the exact employability of each graduate based on research by Sahid & A. Hamid (2019). In the current era of globalization, a study by Yussof, Ismail & Sidin (2008) explores graduates and the job market, addressing current issues where graduates face challenges not only during their studies but also after completing their studies. The issue of unemployment for every student often becomes a nightmare when they must compete with other graduates to find a job suitable for their skills and abilities. Not only do they have to compete with local graduates, but the issue of foreign labor also becomes a fierce competitor for graduates to secure a place in their dream careers.

Moreover, the globalization era, driven by technological advancements, intensifies economic competition worldwide. However, in Malaysia, various issues hinder graduates from obtaining jobs or getting jobs that match their qualifications. This is a consequence of the country's economic performance being at a moderate level. Consequently, the employability of graduates in their respective careers faces conflicts, making it difficult for them to realize their dream careers. An estimated 56 percent of 385,800 unemployed individuals in Malaysia are graduates who cannot find jobs (Lai & Aziz, 2019). The bitter reality they face is that the beautiful dreams after completing their studies turn into mere fantasies due to several internal and external factors, placing them in such circumstances. Based on students' perceptions of graduate employability in the fourth industrial revolution, they have a deeper understanding of graduate employability in the industry. Indirectly, when students understand the job market after becoming graduates, they can prepare for the future to compete with other graduates for a place in the industry.

Therefore, students should acquire general knowledge and technological skills as well as communication skills to navigate the fourth industrial revolution. Particularly in Malaysia, the use of technology is on the rise due to economic shifts towards the developing industrial revolution. Hence, skilled labor in terms of technology is highly needed. Additionally, students should train themselves in communication because communication in the workplace is the responsibility of every individual in advancing themselves and the company. Proficiency in the mother tongue as a communication medium for university students is considered a study of the country's multiracial language that can provide identity to the nation (Yusoff et al., 2021b, Othman, Ahmad & Esa, 2022f). However, mastery of major foreign languages such as English and Mandarin should be at least acquired to illustrate that graduates are more capable of conveying information effectively to colleagues or business partners (Abdullah & Abd Majid, 2022). Indeed, students must prepare themselves spiritually, socially, and employability-wise to be selected as skilled workers in the country, thereby turning their dream careers into reality and not just fantasies.

Looking from a different perspective, creating human capital is not an easy task. Therefore, human capital is created in higher education to enhance their employability. This human capital

is crucial for the country because having outstanding human capital with basic knowledge and high skills can create an advanced nation comparable to other advanced countries. Consequently, investment in education will be strengthened further to shape excellent human capital. The increase in graduate statistics is also a good indicator for the country resulting from investment in education. However, it will turn into a nightmare if there is an education inflation. This education inflation occurs because the return to the country is less than the amount spent on education. To create a skilled and educated individual is easy, but to realize that all graduates get jobs is almost impossible. The country faces a worrying situation when the investment made becomes in vain if the return is less, leading to a decline in the country's economic performance.

From a different point of view, global education plays a crucial role in creating competent human resources. The concept of global education emphasizes critical thinking so that graduates can play a role in their future jobs (Mohd Puad & Mad Nawe, 2021). From the government's perspective, the government has played a role in enhancing graduate employability in the industry by introducing several national policies related to entrepreneurship as job opportunities for graduates, hoping to reduce the unemployment rate (Othman et al., 2021b).

As a consequence of the rough graduate employability being closely related to the country's economic performance, collective cooperation should be implemented by all parties to realize the following matters so that graduate employability can be further enhanced, especially in the challenging pandemic era due to fierce competition among each other. Initiatives actively implemented include skill enhancement programs through the Economic Recovery Plan or PENJANA fund (Abdullah & Abd Majid, 2022). Through this initiative, the Ministry has implemented two programs conceptualized as skill enhancement training and professional certification to help improve graduate employability, namely the PENJANA KPT-CAP or Career Advancement Programme and PENJANA KPT-PACE or Professional Certification. Participants in both programs are only targeted at final-year students and graduates of Public Higher Education Institutions (IPTA), including public universities, polytechnics, and community colleges, and Private Higher Education Institutions (IPTS). This program promises job placement offers to participants as soon as they complete the training and meet the set criteria. Therefore, graduates can seize this opportunity to secure a job that suits them.

Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education has been conducting graduate employability intervention programs focusing on final-year graduates and low CGPA graduates from IPTA by providing additional skills to enhance their employability when seeking employment. Additionally, the pandemic that has affected the world, including Malaysia, has slowed down various efforts to improve graduate employability. The Graduate Tracking Study 2020 conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (KPT) also showed a decline in the graduate employability rate by 1.8 percent, reaching 84.4 percent last year compared to 86.2 percent in 2019 (Idris, 2021). Therefore, the launch of the Graduate Employability Strategic Plan 2021-2025 by the Ministry of Higher Education on October 16, 2021, is expected to revitalize graduate employability activities in higher education institutions (IPT) in Malaysia for the next five years (Idris, 2021). If only the government plays a role in improving graduate employability and graduates remain in their comfort zones, the goal will not be realized without collective cooperation from various parties (Idris, 2021). Therefore, graduates should collectively improve their skills to gain a place in the hearts of employers in Malaysia.

Issue 4: Transforming Fantasy Dreams into Reality

Undoubtedly, the pursuit of one's dream career is a common goal, particularly for recent graduates who have just completed their studies at the tertiary level. However, many individuals in society face challenges in securing employment or a career aligned with their interests. Frequently, the populace is presented with the rationale that graduates lack effective communication skills, struggle with job selection, and lack work experience, thereby hindering them from obtaining positions commensurate with their qualifications. Conversely, with an increase in data collection activities regarding programs aimed at enhancing graduates' employability, viable solutions to the employment issues of the younger generation can be proposed, mitigating the tendency to point fingers at various parties. The competitive job market in Malaysia necessitates graduates to be more attuned to current needs in meeting job market requirements.

Attaining a career immediately upon completing studies at an institution of higher learning is a key benchmark of a graduate's employability. In the era of globalization, employers emphasize not only technical skills or hard skills but also underscore employability skills or soft skills. This emphasis is intended to enable employees to adapt to various job types while concurrently possessing a diversity of abilities (multiskills) in task execution (Rameshan & Hamzah, 2022). This trend is driven by the increasing number of graduates entering the labor market each year, a consequence of the growing number of higher education institutions in the country producing a rising number of graduates annually.

Numerous studies have been conducted to identify career selection factors, particularly among the youth or recent graduates. Factors influencing an individual's pursuit of their dream career encompass various aspects, with potential employers focusing on aspects such as graduates' personalities, as highlighted in a study on the allure of graduate personalities in organizations (Norman et al., 2017). From this perspective, graduate employability involves producing individuals not only well-versed in their chosen fields but who also possess soft skills and positive personal qualities that enable them to compete in the job market effectively. Graduates need to be cognizant that contemporary employers seek workers with both skills and positive attitudes (Rameshan & Hamzah, 2022). This is because employers aim to avoid retraining graduates' post-studies, assuming that graduates should have applied these skills during their academic journey. Failure to demonstrate these skills can adversely impact the productivity of existing employees, necessitating employers to incur unnecessary costs.

Leadership is also a focal point in achieving one's dream career, given that employers seek individuals capable of showcasing leadership abilities. This quality is highly sought after, particularly among the youth today (Norman et al., 2017). The personalities of graduates that attract organizations include qualities such as leadership, perseverance, adherence to instructions, adaptability, resilience, maturity, high self-confidence, and interpersonal skills – all traits sought after by employers (Othman, Rahim & Abu Bakar, 2022g). Graduates or employees possessing leadership qualities excel in problem-solving and demonstrate proficiency in working within a team.

The rapid economic development in Malaysia has generated various employment sectors, and individuals harbor diverse interests. In choosing a career path, interest becomes a crucial aspect as it imbues individuals with enthusiasm for their work. The right career choice can bring joy and satisfaction, while an ill-suited career choice may induce boredom and jeopardize an individual's future. Therefore, in pursuing one's dream career, it is imperative for individuals

to identify their interests to provide benefits in the future and create satisfying work quality for both employers and them (Ahmad Zanzali & Rahmat, 2010). Career selection among students is a critical matter to ensure that the chosen field aligns with an individual's future success. Many factors have been outlined in this article, including interest, career advantages, parental influence, talent, abilities, and personality. Among these, interest has emerged as a pivotal factor influencing an individual's pursuit of their dream career.

Despite ongoing debates among employers, most higher education institutions incorporate employability skill development into their curricula. However, employers continue to report that graduates are not adequately prepared for the workforce due to various factors and a lack of fundamental skills required for successful employment and mutual benefit. Investigating the reasons for this issue may require a multifaceted perspective, involving stakeholders such as the government, employers, higher education institutions, and the graduates themselves. Interestingly, the views of students, the recipients of this employability development, are not widely known. This knowledge gap is significant because learning theories posit that student motivation and commitment are crucial prerequisites for effective outcomes, endowing graduates with diverse skills essential for competing in the job market. Therefore, the question arises as to whether undergraduate students are actively engaged in employability skill development.

Conclusion: Recommendations And Future Directions

Acknowledging the undeniable link between dream careers and suitable candidates, particularly amid favorable labor market trends that benefit graduates, is imperative. However, maintaining a robust labor market poses challenges for countries grappling with external and internal conflicts. Graduates not only contend locally but also face competition from foreign labor seeking employment. In response, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) initiate transformative educational measures, equipping graduates with employability elements to address unemployment. The implementation of various solutions aims to achieve discussed goals, enhancing individuals, including graduates, to elevate qualifications and instill essential soft skills for the job market. Aligning career aspirations with challenges in career determination, providing solutions to reduce unemployment rates, contributes to fostering high-quality graduates.

Issue 1: Graduates' Direction After Learning

In conclusion, a career holds significant importance in human life. Some individuals maintain a single job, while others engage in multiple careers, often transitioning between them. Through employment, individuals earn a livelihood, support dependents, and contribute to society. Careers also play a crucial role in personal development, providing satisfaction in one's work that, in turn, influences both internal and external well-being. Many graduates often expect the knowledge acquired during their academic pursuits to be seamlessly applicable in their respective careers. However, this perception is no longer relevant in today's context.

Fields of study pursued over three to four years in tertiary institutions serve as the foundation for graduates to apply in their future careers. Some aspects of this knowledge can be universally applied, while others may not. What is more critical is the readiness of graduates to think beyond conventional boundaries. For instance, an individual with a background in engineering does not necessarily have to become an engineer, and a graduate in computer science need not limit themselves to becoming a data analyst. Employers are more interested in evaluating the

extent to which graduates are willing and able to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during their studies in the workplace.

The willingness of graduates to think outside the box can contribute to their success in the future. For example, a graduate in human development has succeeded as a successful insurance agent. Therefore, graduates should take initiative in participating in government-led initiatives, such as the Ministry of Higher Education's Graduate Employability Program and Unemployed Graduates Program, conducted in collaboration with various agencies. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Human Resources implements various programs, including Job Registration and Placement through the JobsMalaysia portal, establishing JobsMalaysia Centers and Career Carnivals. In essence, comprehensive planning and adjustments to the national framework need to be made to minimize future unemployment rates. The modified national framework should systematically plan the form and requirements of the workforce to be channeled into sectors needed in the country's economy, both presently and in the future. Therefore, planning should commence at the school and higher education levels.

In reality, policies and scientific programs in schools and educational institutions are systematic and controlled. When existing programs are controllable, adjustments can be made to ensure that the workforce provided by higher education institutions is useful and practical, aligning with current needs. Students in higher education cannot be considered mature, independent, and capable of shaping their own future. They are still raw and unable to assess the evolution and patterns of Malaysia's future needs and economy. They should not be left to choose their courses independently, as the endpoint is not limited to their academic journey. The selection of courses requires precise and calculated guidance, based on the job market's needs five to ten years from their learning period. Additionally, the Minister of Higher Education has proposed initiatives to increase industry involvement in improving graduate employability (Mohamed, 2018). This includes both formal and informal training, entrepreneurial programs, smart partnerships with industries, international internships, and instilling positive values through student mobility programs.

To realize these effective approaches, one of the suggestions for industry involvement in enhancing graduate employability is through curriculum development. Industries should actively participate in the formulation and implementation of a curriculum based on industry needs. In collaboration with industries, developed curricula will be relevant to current industrial and technological requirements. Outdated curriculum issues can be addressed by realigning the curriculum according to industry needs. This ensures that graduates produced by Public Higher Education Institutions acquire academic skills meeting the current job market's demands. The 'Niche Area' program, where a specific program is highlighted as a focus area in higher education institutions with industry advice, is another proposal (Mohamed, 2018). This helps in creating a curriculum that meets the latest needs and technologies, with practical equipment and facilities aligned with the curriculum and current technology needs in the industry.

Developing a 'Center of Technology' is suggested to boost research, development, and commercialization programs (R&D&C) (Mohamed, 2018). Industries can participate by joining research groups, either conducting research for the industry or the higher education institution. Industries can also manage the patenting of products produced by students and lecturers, leading to commercialization. As partners, industries can act as manufacturers/producers to produce and market the products. Such programs involving

students and industry in research enable students to gain teamwork skills, communication skills, negotiation skills, and other soft skills contributing to the development of human skills.

Industrial Engagement Programs for lecturers aim to provide them with additional knowledge and industry experience to enhance the teaching and learning process. Industries should provide opportunities for lecturers from higher education institutions to undergo training through the Industrial Engagement Program (Mohamed, 2018). Lecturers can gain 'hands-on' experience and practical realities in the industry. With additional knowledge acquired from the industry, lecturers are more competent in conducting the teaching and learning process, producing industrially knowledgeable graduates. The higher the graduate employability rate, the higher the quality of graduates produced by higher education institutions, capable of meeting the demands of the industry. The graduate employability rate is closely related to the country's economic performance and job market. Therefore, collective and joint cooperation among all parties is crucial to ensure the enhancement of graduate employability rates, especially in the present time.

Among the initiatives provided by the Ministry of Higher Education is the implementation of skills enhancement programs through the Economic Revitalization Plan or PENJANA fund (Berita Harian, 2020b). Through this initiative, the Ministry has implemented two programs conceptualized as skills enhancement and professional certification training to help improve graduate employability, namely the PENJANA KPT-CAP or Career Advancement Program and PENJANA KPT-PACE or Professional Certification (Berita Harian, 2020b). The target participants for both programs are final year students and graduates from Public Higher Education Institutions (IPTA) (including public universities, polytechnics, and community colleges) and Private Higher Education Institutions (IPTS) for the years 2019, 2020, and 2021 who are still unemployed. Interestingly, both programs promise job placement offers to participants as soon as they complete the training and meet the specified criteria. In addition, the Ministry of Higher Education conducts annual graduate employability intervention programs focusing on final-year students and IPTA graduates with low CGPA by providing them with additional skills to improve their employability rates (Berita Harian, 2020b). Participants in these programs will also be offered job placements by industries as soon as they complete the training and meet the specified criteria. Moreover, the Ministry also implements entrepreneurship programs for students to encourage them to enter this field.

At the same time, the ministry continually enhances cooperation between the industry and academia in higher education institutions. This focus extends beyond implementing one-off programs, involving more medium- and long-term initiatives, such as reviewing modules and study programs, improving curricula, and providing more 'industry-driven' teaching and learning facilities to students. In today's challenging economic situation, it is insufficient for graduates who successfully complete their studies to possess knowledge solely in academic matters. It is increasingly essential for graduates to have skills that can enhance their employability prospects. Therefore, industry involvement is crucial to ensuring the success of strategies and programs designed to enhance graduate employability. Industries should play a more active role in fulfilling their social responsibility of training graduates to acquire soft skills and academic skills suitable for enhancing graduate employability (Mohamed, 2018; Rameshan & Hamzah, 2022). With the collaborative role played by both industries and higher education institutions, the current issues of graduate employability can be reduced, contributing to the creation of a first-class human capital among Malaysian graduates.

Issue 2: Labor Market Development

As a concluding remark, the labor market is an integral component of any economic activity. This is because the labor market involves the workforce, which serves as the primary source for the country's development and economic growth. The dynamics of the labor market often fluctuate and are not static. Furthermore, the development of the labor market is challenging to analyze due to numerous factors influencing it. For instance, cross-border migration significantly impacts the labor market. The recent developments in the labor market have been worrisome, primarily due to the repercussions of the pandemic, which have adversely affected the country's economy. However, as of 2022, the labor market has shown positive growth, providing a sigh of relief for graduates. The development of the labor market is crucial for every graduate (Othman, 2012). Nevertheless, despite improvements in the labor market, many graduates still face the nightmare of their dream careers existing only in imagination rather than reality. Their efforts often go unrewarded after successfully completing their studies, as they struggle to secure suitable employment. This situation arises from various internal and external factors that hinder the realization of their dream careers. Despite the gradual improvement in the labor market, the high unemployment rate among graduates remains a concern.

Graduates find themselves confronted with the nightmare of "unemployment" after completing their studies, and some students are burdened with educational debts, unable to repay loans incurred during their academic journey. The government collaborates to address unemployment issues and provides opportunities for graduates to attain their dream jobs. Various initiatives, both internal and external, have been implemented, yet many graduates still struggle to realize their dream careers. According to media reports, an estimated 1.87 million workers are in jobs that do not match their qualifications (Zainuddin, 2021). It is undeniable that the government has made efforts to assist graduates in securing their dream careers, but there are shortcomings in the initiatives implemented. As an improvement to existing initiatives, several suggestions and directions can be proposed to develop a stable national economy with a well-functioning labor productivity and increased opportunities for graduates to see their efforts in education translate into fulfilling careers. One suggestion is for the government to establish regulations for employers in Malaysia, requiring monthly document verification of their employees.

This effort should be undertaken by responsible authorities to ensure that the hired workforce is legally authorized and not foreign employees without proper permits, as outlined in the Immigration Act 1959/63 related to legal employment (Mohamed, Ajis & Md. Zain, 2019). It is widely known that in Malaysia, especially in border areas, some employers tend to easily hire foreign workers. This is frequently observed in Sabah areas such as Tawau, Lahad Datu, Semporna, Sandakan, and Kunak, where a significant number of undocumented foreign workers have established themselves, creating sizable informal settlements like the one in Kampung Titingan Tawau, predominantly inhabited by undocumented immigrants from the Philippines (Mohamad, Haniffa & Shatir, 2021). Despite the settlement's existence since the 1980s, it remains intact without local authority maintenance. Consequently, thousands of undocumented immigrants seek jobs in urban areas for their livelihoods. In response, some employers take advantage of employing this group, sidelining the rights of Malaysian citizens residing in that area. This occurs because the offered wages for undocumented foreign workers are lower than those for local residents. Hence, employers opt for the easier route to increase profits by hiring undocumented foreign workers.

Consequently, many graduates find themselves unemployed despite their high-level education. To address this ongoing issue, authorities should conduct monthly inspections of premises to prevent employers from hiring undocumented foreign workers. From a different perspective, the government should implement more programs to assist and provide more opportunities for graduates. To curb the continuous occurrence of unemployment among graduates, the Ministry of Higher Education should take the lead in shaping the human capital to strengthen graduates' interpersonal skills, soft skills, and employability skills. One strategy that needs to be strengthened is investment in technical and vocational education. In general, technical and vocational education prioritizes skills, and employers highly demand these skills because graduates from these institutions show exceptional talents in their chosen fields. Simultaneously, they become accustomed to their respective fields, attracting many companies to hire them. Companies believe that graduates from technical and vocational institutes have received in-depth training, making it easier for them to mentor these graduates, thereby maximizing the firms' profits. Consequently, investing in technical and vocational education will yield significant returns for the country.

Thus, graduate unemployment can be reduced, and the labor market can be developed for the country's economic well-being. Furthermore, as outlined in the 2023 Budget, various dimensions will be strengthened, such as providing incentives to work and realigning skills and competencies to meet industry demands. These initiatives aim to fully support the country's economic output (Berita Harian, 2022a). Youth unemployment, graduate employability, worker protection, and talent development are among the main focuses of the 2023 Budget. The targeted groups are urged to leverage high technology to stimulate digital-based growth. These efforts will further strengthen the high-skilled workforce while improving their quality of life (Othman et al., 2021c). Due to the reduced workforce in the country's economic sectors caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, inclusive measures, including filling vacancies with local talent, encouraging employers to provide job opportunities for the disabled, indigenous people, ex-convicts, and women, and improving job matching mechanisms, are crucial to reducing employment barriers.

The 2023 Budget also proposes the establishment of MYFutureJobs Satellite Centers nationwide and the National Placement Center to help individuals find jobs more easily and quickly. In a similar vein, research findings indicate that the 2023 Budget encompasses vital aspects of labor market empowerment strategies, aligning with the 12th Malaysia Plan (Berita Harian, 2022a). For example, the financing fund of RM235 million can encourage more women to enhance their business capacities and improve their marketing strategies under schemes such as the Semarak-Nita BSN Scheme, TEKUN's Tekunita, MARA's DanaNita, and Bank Rakyat's Biz Lady (Mohd Khalid, 2022). All these initiatives are expected to increase the participation of female workers and directly support the goals outlined in Chapter 10 of the 12th Malaysia Plan regarding Future Talent Development. This strategy can indeed be realized to make dream careers a reality for every individual and not just a fantasy. As time passes, every country undoubtedly has objectives as the main purpose of their nation, especially in terms of the economy. Many countries compete to become a monopoly power in the international economic sector.

In light of this, Malaysia also has its objectives, where the country is pooling its efforts to ensure economic growth and the development of the labor market. This is because with the development of the workforce, there will be more job opportunities offered in various economic sectors. Consequently, graduates can breathe a sigh of relief, and they can experience

the dream careers they aspired to while still in school. At the same time, if many job opportunities are offered to graduates, the productivity of the workforce will undoubtedly increase, and the country's activities can advance with skilled labor produced by Malaysia. Additionally, the unemployment rate among graduates can be reduced, resulting in low levels of unemployment in the country. However, these objectives will not be realized unless the government and the governed unite their efforts to collectively advance the nation. Without consensus, building an advanced nation will become difficult because unity brings blessings.

Issue 3: Graduate Employability in The Industry

Graduates are a workforce possessing expertise in various aspects within specific fields. In the current era of globalization, graduates play a pivotal role in determining the country's future, steering it towards advancement to compete with developed nations. Based on a study conducted by (Abd. Majid & Hussin, 2015), graduate employability has become a contemporary issue, sparking debates and questions from various stakeholders. This is due to factors, whether internal or external, that significantly impact an individual graduate's quality and marketability. In the present era of globalization, graduates are perceived as individuals with extensive knowledge, skills, and experience, earning high regard from society. Therefore, when a graduate remains unemployed after completing their studies, society tends to look down upon them, comparing them unfavorably with individuals lacking an educational background. This social perception poses challenges for graduates, especially those working part-time, such as delivery riders, who have not yet secured their desired job or are actively seeking employment. This societal mindset places graduates under pressure, leading to despair in their pursuit of suitable employment commensurate with their educational qualifications. Consequently, the government should prioritize proposals and directions for graduates to consistently meet industry demands and enhance graduate employability for the sustainability of a conducive society (Othman, Pullong & Maidin, 2022h).

Most employers today emphasize high interpersonal skills such as teamwork, personality, self-confidence, and communication skills. While academic qualifications remain crucial in the job market, an attractive personality exhibited by graduates can significantly aid them in obtaining their desired jobs. The available job market within industries often demands specific qualifications and criteria to fulfill graduates' career aspirations. Graduates need to be aware of the needs and preferences of the job market offered by firms. Thus, the government should seek solutions to assist graduates in facing challenges. Graduates, having earned their degrees, must have suggestions, and set directions post-convocation. Consequently, the government plays a crucial role in helping graduates through programs like the 1Malaysia Training Scheme (SLIM), introduced to assist graduates in securing jobs commensurate with their qualifications (Ngah, 2018). Programs like these also facilitate data collection to identify unemployed graduates and understand the challenges they face.

Graduates should be wise in seizing opportunities offered by both private and public sectors to enhance their employability in specific fields. This is because graduates can improve their employability, convincing employers to offer jobs that match their educational qualifications and career aspirations. The Ministry should commit to assisting graduates through collaboration with industries. For instance, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates should be highlighted by exposing them to programs such as 2u2i programs and the TRC Edu Centre program (Mat Arif, 2018). These programs provide practical opportunities for graduates in the construction field before entering the workforce. As a result, graduates produced can meet industrial needs, alleviating graduate unemployment. In line with

the changing times, the government should be mindful of current issues related to graduate needs. According to a study by Lai & Aziz (2019), contemporary graduates face various challenges and obstacles in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Graduates must navigate these high and evolving challenges to secure positions in their chosen fields. Fierce competition necessitates selective hiring, only choosing the best graduates to join organizations. This situation inevitably leads to graduate unemployment, requiring government initiatives to ensure graduate employability.

Furthermore, graduates and the job market are familiar with current issues. Graduates must face challenging times not only during their studies but also after completing their education. Unemployment is a recurring nightmare for students as they compete with other graduates to secure jobs matching their skills and abilities. Beyond local competition, foreign labor is also a fierce competitor for graduates seeking their dream careers. Moreover, globalization, driven by technological advancements, intensifies the global economic race for recognition as a developed nation. However, Malaysia grapples with numerous issues resulting in many graduates failing to find employment or obtaining jobs unsuited to their qualifications.

Financial assistance is a reasonable approach to help graduates start their businesses. Business is a vast field, and capital is essential for graduates venturing into entrepreneurship. After completing their studies, graduates are obligated to repay the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) for their educational loans, depleting their financial resources for business startups. Graduates may be compelled to find employment immediately to repay their loans, contributing to challenges in post-education employment. Physical and mental health can be affected when graduates are pressured to make repayments without a stable income (Yusoff et al., 2021b). Additionally, societal encouragement and support are crucial in boosting graduates' morale to pursue their chosen fields. Society should refrain from criticizing graduates' job choices and instead provide advice and encouragement, urging them to participate in government-sponsored programs to ensure high graduate employability.

Issue 4: Realizing Fantasy Dreams into Reality

Despite the completion of a graduate's academic journey at the ivory tower level, realizing dream careers, as anticipated by graduates, remains challenging due to several factors beyond graduates' control. The philosophy of the Strategic Plan of Universities in Malaysia, aimed at advancing university reputation as a hub of academic excellence internationally, also involves the nation's ability to reduce the unemployment rate among graduates (Yusoff et al., 2021c). Dream careers are the goal of everyone, especially new graduates who have just completed their studies at the ivory tower level. However, many individuals in society struggle to secure jobs or careers aligned with their interests. Society often hears explanations that graduates lack good communication skills, are picky in job selection, and lack work experience, resulting in them not securing jobs commensurate with their qualifications. Conversely, with increased data collection activities related to programs enhancing good graduate employability, we can suggest solutions to the employment issues faced by the youth instead of blaming any particular party. Competition in the Malaysian job market requires graduates to be more aware of current needs in fulfilling job market requirements. Having a career immediately after graduating from a higher education institution is a measure of graduate employability.

In the era of globalization, employers prioritize not only technical or hard skills but also emphasize employability or soft skills. This is to ensure that employees can adapt to various types of work while possessing diverse abilities (multiskills) to perform tasks. This is due to

the increasing number of graduates entering the labor market each year, attributed to the growing number of higher education institutions in the country producing a higher number of graduates annually. Many studies have been conducted to identify career selection factors among society, especially among the youth or recent graduates. Among the factors that drive individuals to pursue dream careers, many aspects emphasized by potential employers include the personality of the graduate, which becomes the attraction for organizations (Norman et al., 2017). Graduate employability is achieved by producing graduates who not only have good knowledge in their chosen field but also possess interpersonal skills and positive personal qualities that enable them to compete in the job market.

In conclusion, graduates must be highly aware that current employers require workers with skills and a positive attitude. This is because employers try to avoid retraining graduates after completing their studies since graduates should have applied these skills during their academic tenure. If graduates fail to demonstrate these skills, it can affect the productivity of existing employees and require employers to incur unnecessary costs (Rameshan & Hamzah, 2022). Additionally, leadership is a crucial factor in pursuing dream careers as employers seek individuals capable of demonstrating leadership abilities, a quality highly sought after, especially among the youth (Abang Muis, et al., 2021). Employers require workers who can exhibit leadership qualities, perseverance, compliance with instructions, adaptability, resilience, maturity, high self-confidence, and interpersonal skills – all of which are qualities sought by employers. Graduates or employees possessing such leadership qualities can solve problems and work effectively in group settings.

Therefore, graduates need to be well-informed about the skills required by employers while in the academic environment, especially those aspiring to pursue dream careers after completing their studies at the ivory tower level. Rapid economic development has generated various job sectors in Malaysia today, and everyone has different interests from others. In choosing a career path, interest is a crucial aspect, as it motivates individuals to perform tasks more enthusiastically. The right career choice can provide enjoyment and satisfaction to individuals, while an improper career choice can lead to boredom and jeopardize an individual's future. Therefore, in determining dream careers, it is crucial for individuals to identify their interests to provide benefits in the future and create satisfactory work quality for both employers and themselves. Various factors have been listed in the article, including interest factors, career advantage factors, parental influence factors, talent factors, ability, and personality. From all the responses, interest factors have become the influencing factor in the selection of dream careers. Therefore, this reinforces the significance of interest as a factor influencing the selection of dream careers by individuals. Despite ongoing debates among employers, most higher education institutions include employability skill development in their curriculum. However, employers continue to report that graduates are not ready for the workforce due to several emerging factors and the lack of some of the most basic skills required for successful work that provides mutual benefits. Investigating the reasons for this issue may require a comprehensive perspective from various stakeholders, including the government, employers, higher education institutions, and the graduates themselves.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and extended special gratitude to the Global Academic Excellence (M) Sdn Bhd, who granted the Publication Grant Scheme for this project.

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