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IMPROVING JOB SEARCH SKILLS AMONG TVET ESL
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.955035.This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This study investigates the employment barriers faced by graduates from Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs, with a focus on the challenges of creating compelling cover letters and resumes and excelling in job interviews. Employing a comprehensive mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, this research explores the experiences of TVET graduates to understand the complexities of job-seeking challenges. The findings indicate that many graduates struggle with presenting their skills and experiences effectively in written applications and experience significant anxiety and lack of preparation during interviews. These issues are exacerbated by language proficiency and self-confidence challenges, highlighting the need for targeted support and training. The paper offers practical recommendations for educators, career counsellors, and policymakers to integrate specialized training modules and workshops to enhance TVET graduates' job search skills. The goal is to equip these graduates with the tools needed to succeed in a competitive job market.

Keywords:

Employment Barriers, ESL Challenges, Job Search Skills, Mixed-Methods Research, TVET Graduates.

Introduction

Malaysia's efforts to advance its Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system to meet industrial demands are highlighted in the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025, which stresses the need to enhance TVET facilities and support systems to improve the quality of education for TVET graduates (Ismail, 2017). Despite these initiatives, significant challenges remain for educators in devising effective strategies to support this goal. The Malaysian government has been keen on transforming the TVET landscape to ensure it aligns with the rapidly evolving industrial sector's needs, thereby fostering a competent and competitive workforce (Yusof & Awang, 2022).

One of the primary issues is the insufficient competency of teaching staff. Many educators in TVET institutions lack the necessary industrial experience and pedagogical skills required to deliver high-quality education that meets current industry standards (Aziz & Subramaniam, 2023). This gap between educators' capabilities and industry needs significantly hampers the effectiveness of TVET programs. Additionally, there is often a misalignment between the job training provided by TVET institutions and the actual demands of the job market. This discrepancy leads to a situation where graduates possess technical skills that are not immediately relevant or applicable to their intended careers (Khirotudin et al., 2019; Mustapha, 2022).

Moreover, the lack of industry-driven initiatives further exacerbates these challenges. There is a pressing need for stronger partnerships between TVET institutions and industry players to ensure that the curriculum is continually updated to reflect current and future industry trends (Bassah, 2022). These partnerships can provide valuable insights into the skills and competencies that are in high demand, thereby enhancing the employability of TVET graduates (Rahman et al., 2020).

Addressing these specific challenges from an industry perspective is essential to enhance students' readiness for the workforce. While students may excel in their technical fields, there is often a notable gap in employability skills. This gap underscores the need for an educational model that delivers both technical knowledge and the comprehensive skills essential for employment (Singh, 2019). Effective communication skills, particularly in writing, are crucial for employability. Non-native English speakers face additional barriers in articulating their qualifications and competencies to potential employers (Abd. Hamid et al., 2023; Piekkari, 2006).

Apart from that, the importance of English proficiency in the global job market cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that employers highly value English language skills, considering them a critical component of effective communication and professional interaction in multinational environments (Ting et al., 2017; Yusof et al., 2017). The English at Work: Global Workplace Language Skills Study found that over 95% of employers in many non-native English-speaking countries consider English language skills essential (Kamlun, 2020). This underscores the importance of enhancing English proficiency among TVET graduates to improve their job prospects and performance in interviews.

This study aims to explore these job-hunting challenges, emphasizing the need for clear articulation of qualifications, confidence in interviews, and proficiency in English to ensure successful employment outcomes. Utilizing a mixed-methods research design, this study identifies key barriers and formulates targeted interventions and strategies to enhance job search skills within TVET institutions (Zhou et al., 2019). By addressing these challenges comprehensively, the study seeks to provide actionable insights and recommendations to bridge the gap between TVET education and employment, ultimately contributing to the development of a more skilled and employable workforce in Malaysia.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- i. Identify specific challenges faced by TVET graduates in developing job acquisition skills, including writing cover letters and resumes, and interview preparation.
- ii. Propose practical strategies and interventions to improve TVET graduates' job search skills, focusing on enhancing their ability to craft effective cover letters and resumes and to prepare for interviews.

Literature Review

Employability skills encompass a range of competencies, including technical abilities, communication proficiency, problem-solving capabilities, and teamwork skills, which are essential for successful integration into the workforce. According to Yorke (2006), employability refers to a set of achievements such as skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. In the context of TVET graduates, these skills are critical due to the practical and industry-focused nature of their training programs.

Numerous studies highlight the challenges TVET graduates face in the job market, particularly in crafting compelling job applications and performing well in interviews. Aziz and Subramaniam (2023) found that many graduates struggle with presenting their skills effectively in written formats, such as cover letters and resumes, which are critical for securing job interviews. Additionally, Khirotdin et al. (2019) observed that graduates often experience significant anxiety and lack of preparation during interviews, further hindering their employability. A summary of past findings on these challenges is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Past Findings on The Challenges Faced by TVET Graduates

Study	Findings
Aziz & Subramaniam (2023)	Graduates struggle with presenting skills effectively in written formats
Khirotadin et al. (2019)	Significant anxiety and lack of preparation during interviews
Ting et al. (2017)	Employers highly value English communication skills in multinational environments
Yusof et al. (2017)	Non-native English speakers face additional barriers in articulating their qualifications effectively
Rahman et al. (2020)	Targeted job search training can build confidence and preparedness

English language proficiency plays a crucial role in enhancing employability, especially in a globalized job market. Employers highly value English communication skills as they are essential for professional interaction in multinational environments (Ting et al., 2017). Non-native English speakers, including many TVET graduates, often face additional barriers in articulating their qualifications and competencies effectively, both in writing and orally (Piekkari, 2006). This language proficiency gap can significantly impact their ability to secure employment (Yusof et al., 2017).

To address these challenges, various strategies have been proposed to enhance job search skills among TVET graduates. These include integrating comprehensive training modules on writing cover letters and resumes into the TVET curriculum, conducting mock interviews, and offering workshops focused on interview techniques and effective communication (Singh, 2019). Such initiatives can build the confidence and preparedness of graduates, making them more competitive in the job market (Rahman et al., 2020).

Strengthening partnerships between TVET institutions and industry players is crucial for ensuring that the training provided aligns with current industry demands (Bassah, 2022). These collaborations can help keep the curriculum updated with the latest industry trends and provide students with relevant practical experiences (Mustapha, 2022). By bridging the gap between education and industry requirements, such partnerships can significantly enhance the employability of TVET graduates.

The importance of effective employability skills, English language proficiency, targeted job search training, and industry collaboration cannot be overstated in improving job prospects for TVET graduates. These elements are essential for equipping graduates with the necessary tools to successfully navigate the job market and secure employment that aligns with their training and aspirations.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore the challenges faced by TVET graduates from Politeknik Besut Terengganu in developing job search skills, specifically focusing on writing cover letters and resumes and mastering job interviews. The mixed-methods approach combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of these challenges.

Quantitative Data Collection: Sample Dimension

The quantitative phase of the study involved administering a survey to recent TVET graduates. Out of a total of 61 graduates from Politeknik Besut Terengganu in 2023, 55 responded to the survey, yielding a high response rate. This sample included 36 graduates who had entered the workforce and 19 who had chosen to pursue further education.

To gather quantitative insights, electronic questionnaires were distributed to these graduates using platforms such as Google Forms, WhatsApp, and Telegram. The questionnaire was designed with five-point Likert-scale items, which assessed various aspects of the graduates' experiences and challenges related to job search skills. The questions focused on three main areas: writing cover letters and resumes, preparing for job interviews, and proficiency in the English language. The data collected from these surveys were then analysed to identify trends

and patterns in the challenges faced by the graduates. The study was conducted over a period of three months, from January to March 2023, to ensure comprehensive data collection.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires used in this study were adapted from previous research on job search skills and employability (Bassah, 2022). This ensured that the questions were relevant and had been validated in similar contexts. Modifications were made to suit the specific context of TVET graduates and the local job market conditions.

Challenges of Data Management

Data management posed several challenges, including ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, managing data consistency, and dealing with incomplete responses. These challenges were mitigated by employing robust data management practices, such as using secure online platforms for data collection, implementing data validation checks, and following strict ethical guidelines.

Qualitative Data Collection: Participant Selection

For the qualitative phase of the study, a purposeful sampling method was employed to select participants for in-depth interviews. Purposeful sampling is a non-random technique used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. This method ensures that the selected participants can provide detailed and relevant insights into the research questions.

Five TVET graduates from Politeknik Besut Terengganu were chosen for individual semi-structured interviews. These participants were selected to represent the most recent graduates, ensuring that the data reflected current experiences and challenges. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to discuss their experiences and perspectives in detail while still addressing the study's core themes.

The interviews focused on four central themes which are the composition of cover letters and resumes, preparation for job interviews, proficiency in the English language, and recommendations for improvement. Each interview was conducted in a manner that encouraged open and honest dialogue, providing participants with the opportunity to share their challenges and suggestions without constraint. The qualitative data obtained from these interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and insights.

Therefore, by integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study offers a robust analysis of the difficulties TVET graduates face in developing job search skills. The combination of broad survey data and detailed interview insights provides a well-rounded understanding of the barriers and potential strategies for improvement.

Findings and Discussion

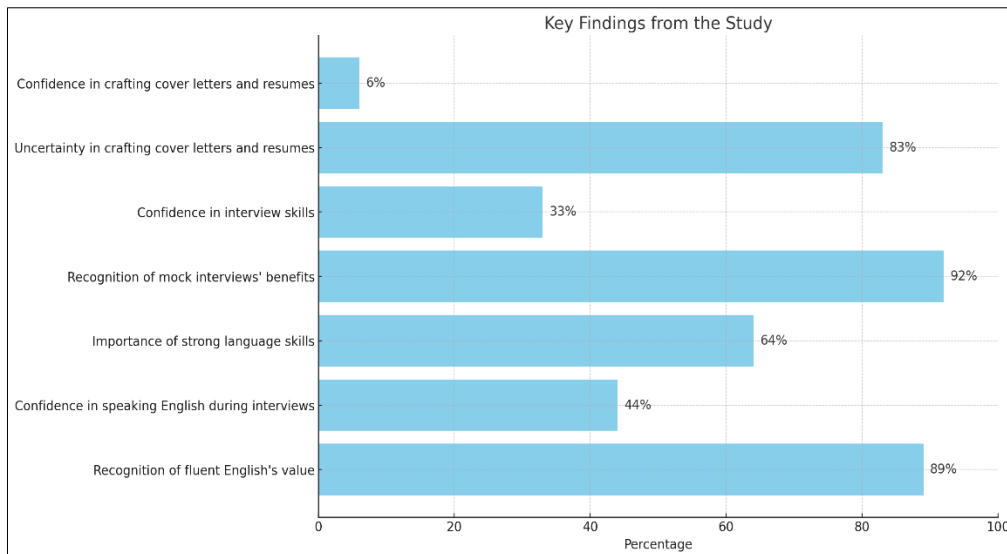


Figure 1: Key Findings from The Study

Figure 1 above provides a clear visual representation of the key findings regarding TVET graduates' job search skills and language proficiency. Each bar corresponds to a specific aspect of the graduates' experiences, with the length of the bar indicating the percentage of respondents who identified with each aspect.

Confidence in Crafting Cover Letters and Resumes

The quantitative analysis revealed a significant lack of confidence among TVET graduates regarding their ability to craft effective cover letters and resumes. Only 6% of the respondents felt confident in their skills, while a substantial 83% expressed varying degrees of uncertainty. This lack of confidence can be attributed to several factors, including unfamiliarity with standard formats and difficulty tailoring documents to specific job requirements. The data indicated that many graduates struggle to highlight their skills and experiences in a manner that appeals to employers. Additionally, 33% of the participants did not consistently proofread their application materials, which further diminishes the quality and professionalism of their submissions. This highlights a critical need for training that focuses on the fundamentals of professional writing, as well as on techniques for customizing application materials to align with job specifications.

Challenges in Job Interviews

The challenges identified in crafting application documents were mirrored in the interview process. Approximately 52% of the participants reported difficulties with job interviews, and only 33% felt confident in their interview skills. The lack of familiarity with effective interview strategies emerged as a significant barrier, with many graduates admitting that they did not conduct adequate research on companies prior to their interviews. This lack of preparation can severely impact performance, as understanding a company's background and needs is crucial for tailoring responses and demonstrating genuine interest. Despite these challenges, there was a high level of recognition (92%) of the benefits of mock interviews. Participants noted that mock interviews helped them gain valuable practice, reduce anxiety, and receive constructive

feedback, which are essential components for improving their overall performance in real interview scenarios.

Importance of Language Proficiency

Language proficiency, particularly in English, was identified as a crucial factor in the job search process. While 64% of participants acknowledged the importance of strong language skills, many felt uncertain about their English writing abilities. This uncertainty was also evident in oral communication, with only 44% feeling confident speaking English during interviews. The data revealed that 89% of participants recognized the value of fluent English in making a favourable impression on potential employers. This indicates a widespread awareness among TVET graduates of the competitive advantage provided by proficient English communication skills, yet it also underscores a significant area of weakness that needs addressing through targeted language training programs.

Qualitative Insights

The qualitative data obtained from interviews provided deeper insights into the specific challenges faced by TVET graduates. Participants frequently mentioned difficulties in structuring their cover letters and resumes. They often felt overwhelmed by the multitude of available templates and unsure about selecting the most appropriate ones. Moreover, many graduates struggled with effectively summarizing their qualifications and experiences to match job descriptions. The interviews also highlighted significant anxiety and lack of preparation during job interviews. Graduates reported feeling nervous and unsure of how to present themselves professionally, particularly when interviews were conducted in English. The challenge of discussing salary expectations was also noted as a particularly daunting aspect of the interview process.

Participants offered several suggestions for improving job search skills, including formal, instructor-led training sessions, workshops, and the provision of independent learning resources such as online templates and guides. They expressed a desire for more structured support in their final semesters, which would provide them with the necessary tools and confidence to enter the job market.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals significant challenges faced by TVET graduates in developing job search skills, particularly in crafting compelling cover letters and resumes and performing well in job interviews. These challenges are especially pronounced for non-native English speakers, who face additional barriers in effectively articulating their qualifications and competencies to potential employers. The findings highlight a pervasive lack of confidence and proficiency among graduates in these critical areas, which undermines their employability and hinders their ability to secure suitable job opportunities.

The study underscores the urgent need for targeted training initiatives to address these deficiencies. One of the primary recommendations is to integrate comprehensive training modules on writing cover letters and resumes into the TVET curriculum. These modules should provide practical guidance on the structure and content of application materials, offering students the skills and confidence needed to effectively highlight their qualifications and experiences. By incorporating these training sessions into the academic program, TVET institutions can ensure that graduates are better prepared to meet the expectations of employers.

Additionally, the study advocates for the implementation of mock interviews, workshops, and interview strategy sessions. These activities are crucial for building confidence and preparedness among graduates. Mock interviews can provide a safe and supportive environment for students to practice their interview skills, receive constructive feedback, and refine their approach. Workshops and strategy sessions can offer valuable insights into effective interview techniques, common pitfalls to avoid, and strategies for presenting oneself professionally. Through these interventions, graduates can gain the knowledge and self-assurance needed to navigate the interview process successfully.

Furthermore, the provision of language assistance services is essential to improve the English proficiency of non-native speakers. Given the significant role of English in the job market, enhancing language skills is critical for effective communication in both written and oral formats. TVET institutions should offer courses, workshops, and materials specifically designed to bolster the English proficiency of students, focusing on job search contexts such as writing resumes and cover letters and conducting interviews. By improving their language skills, graduates can better articulate their qualifications and make a positive impression on potential employers.

The study's objectives were to identify specific challenges faced by TVET graduates in developing job acquisition skills and to propose practical strategies to improve these skills. The findings clearly indicate that these objectives were met, as the study provided a detailed analysis of the barriers faced by graduates and offered targeted recommendations to address these issues.

By implementing these recommendations, TVET institutions can significantly enhance the job search skills of their graduates. These targeted training initiatives will not only improve the immediate employability of TVET graduates but also equip them with lifelong skills that will benefit them throughout their careers. Consequently, these efforts will contribute to a more capable and confident workforce, better prepared to meet the demands of the job market and to secure employment opportunities that align with their training and aspirations.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of these training initiatives on graduates' career progression and job satisfaction. Additionally, studies could investigate the effectiveness of different teaching methods and tools in improving job search skills among TVET graduates. By continuing to refine and adapt these strategies, TVET institutions can ensure they are providing the most effective support to their students.

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