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DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN MALAYSIA: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

Graduate employability in Malaysia has become a significant issue as many graduates enter the competitive job market. This systematic literature review aims to create an integrated model to enhance the employability of Malaysian graduates by synthesizing existing information on the key determinants that impact employability outcomes. A comprehensive search of academic, government, and industry papers was conducted, with an emphasis on research published between 2000 and 2024. The review highlights many important factors of graduate employability, including the quality and relevance of higher education, skills mismatch, economic conditions, government policies, and the importance of soft skills and industry collaboration. The proposed model emphasizes the role of internal elements (education, skills, personal characteristics) and external factors (economic conditions, labor market demands, government efforts) in shaping graduate employability in Malaysia. The findings highlight the importance of a comprehensive and coordinated approach that combines educational institutions, industry, and policymakers to improve graduate outcomes. This research provides important insights for improving graduate employability strategies and practical recommendations for stakeholders to bridge the employability gap in the Malaysian workforce.

Keywords:

Employability Framework, Graduate Employability, Higher Education, Integrated Model, Skills Mismatch

Introduction

The transition from education to employment is becoming increasingly challenging, particularly in Malaysia, where the number of university graduates is increasing year on year. Despite this increase, many graduates face difficulties in finding jobs that match their qualifications, raising serious concerns about graduate employability (Lim et al., 2019; Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2021). Numerous studies have found a persistent mismatch between the skills taught in higher education institutions and those sought by the labour market (Ismail et al., 2020; Alias et al., 2022). This skills gap is often attributed to outdated curricula, inadequate soft skills development, limited industry exposure, and a lack of work-integrated learning opportunities (Suleman, 2018). Furthermore, despite the Malaysian government's efforts to bridge this gap through initiatives such as the Graduate Employability Blueprint (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012) and the MyFutureJobs platform, graduate under employability and unemployment remain widespread (Abdullah et al., 2023). Economic shifts, technological advancements, and globalization have increased competition for jobs, requiring graduates to possess not only academic knowledge but also a range of transferable skills such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and digital literacy (Lowden et al., 2011; Saad et al., 2021). As a result, enhancing graduate employability requires a holistic approach that considers both internal factors such as educational quality, skill acquisition, and personal development and external factors including labor market dynamics, employer expectations, and government policies (Yorke, 2006; Harvey, 2010). The need for a comprehensive and integrated strategy is particularly important in Malaysia, where employability is influenced by cultural, economic, and policy-driven issues specific to the country (Mok, 2016). The aim of this systematic literature review is to establish an integrated model of graduate employability that is appropriate to the Malaysian context. This study aims to uncover the multidimensional components that influence employability by synthesizing existing theories such as Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988), as well as empirical studies on graduate outcomes. This review is guided by three main research questions: (1) What factors influence graduate employment in Malaysia? (2) How can the existing employability framework be modified and integrated to better represent the unique Malaysian labour market conditions? (3) What gaps exist in the current model, and how can they be filled to enhance the employability of Malaysian graduates? The aim of this review with research is to provide important insights for policymakers, educational institutions and industry stakeholders who wish to improve graduate outcomes and bridge Malaysia's skills gap.

Literature Review

Graduate employability has received increasing attention in academic research and policymaking due to its importance in influencing labour market outcomes and national economic development (Yorke, 2006; Harvey, 2010). Graduate unemployment in Malaysia persists despite increasing access to higher education, revealing a serious mismatch between educational output and labour market demand (Lim, Rich, & Harris, 2019). This section synthesizes findings from the current systematic literature to identify and categorize the key determinants that influence graduate employment in Malaysia, using a theoretical framework and empirical evidence.

Conceptualizing Graduate Employability

Employability is generally characterized as a combination of achievement skills, understandings, and personal characteristics that increase a graduate's chances of finding work

and succeeding in their chosen career (Yorke, 2006). Harvey (2001) defines employability as the ability of a graduate to function successfully in a dynamic labour market, not simply to find a job. Employability in Malaysia is increasingly defined as a combination of technical abilities, soft skills, work experience, and the ability to adapt to changing labour market situations (Ismail, Hassan, & Abu Bakar, 2020). As a result, understanding graduate employability requires a multidimensional approach that considers both internal graduate characteristics and external market conditions.

Internal Factors Influencing Employability

Skills Development

Many studies have emphasized the relevance of both hard skills (technical skills) and soft skills (communication, teamwork, problem-solving) in increasing employability (Lowden et al., 2011; Saad, Majid, & Daud, 2021). Employers in Malaysia routinely claim that graduates lack soft skills such as critical thinking, leadership, and English fluency, which are key hurdles to employment (Alias, Salleh, & Awang, 2022). According to research, while Malaysian universities have attempted to incorporate soft skills training into curricula, the efficiency of these interventions is dubious (Suleman 2018). Graduates with a good combination of technical and interpersonal abilities are more likely to meet employer expectations and find long-term employment.

Educational Attainment and Quality

The quality and relevance of academic programs have a substantial impact on employment results. Mok (2016) and Abdullah, Hamid, and Ali (2023) found that mismatches between university curricula and industrial requirements are widespread in Malaysia. Graduates often have theoretical knowledge but lack the practical skills needed in the workplace. Furthermore, discrepancies in public and private university standards compound employment issues, with graduates from exceptional universities typically having superior labour market results (Lim et al., 2019).

Personal Attributes and Career Management Skills

Personal characteristics including adaptability, resilience, motivation, and career management skills are also important for employability (Yorke, 2006; Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). Graduates who actively pursue lifelong learning, networking, and proactive career planning have higher employability rates (Ismail et al., 2020). However, Malaysian research shows that many graduates lack career self-management skills and rely primarily on institutional support for job advancement (Mahmud & Kamaruddin, 2019).

External Factors Influencing Employability

Economic Conditions and Labour Market Dynamics

Macroeconomic factors such as economic growth, industrial expansion, and technological advancements all have a significant impact on graduate employment. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has dramatically changed the job market, accelerating automation and digitalization trends that disproportionately affect recent graduates (World Bank, 2020). In Malaysia, sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, and services have been significantly impacted, further reducing career options for recent graduates.

Industry Collaboration and Work Experience

Work-integrated learning (WIL), internships, and industry collaborations enhance graduate employability by providing students with practical skills and professional networks (Jackson, 2013; Pegg et al., 2012). However, research has revealed a lack of systematic coordination between Malaysian universities and industry, resulting in wasted opportunities for students to gain relevant experience before graduation (Alias et al., 2022). Internships, apprenticeships, and real-world projects are essential to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice.

Government Initiatives and Policy Frameworks

The Malaysian government has launched many programs to improve graduate employability, including the Graduate Employability Management Scheme (GEMS) and the MyFutureJobs portal (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012). These programs aim to improve graduate skills, increase job placement, and promote entrepreneurship. However, critics argue that, while these programs are beneficial, they often suffer from fragmented implementation and insufficient stakeholder participation (Mahmud & Kamaruddin, 2019). An integrated policy strategy involving universities, companies, and government agencies is needed to achieve long-term improvements in graduate employability.

Existing Models of Graduate Employability

Several conceptual and theoretical models that aim to explain the relationship between education, skill acquisition, and labor market outcomes have formed the basis for graduate employability research. Among the most influential are Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, the Employability Framework, and, more recently, Integrated Models, which incorporate many factors of employability. Each model provides useful insights, but it also has limits, especially when applied to the Malaysian context.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, first articulated by Becker (1964), holds that education and training increase an individual's productivity and thus their value in the labour market. According to this idea, investing in higher education should result in better employment opportunities and higher pay because graduates are assumed to have the knowledge and skills that employers require. In Malaysia, the Human Capital strategy has had a considerable impact on national policies aiming at producing a competent workforce to promote economic growth (Minister of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012). Critics claim that the theory oversimplifies the intricacies of current labour markets by assuming a direct relationship between education and employment results (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton 2008). Empirical evidence from Malaysia indicates that many graduates, while having formal qualifications, fail to find work due to skill mismatches, implying that education alone may not be adequate for employability (Ismail, Hassan, and Abu Bakar, 2020).

Social Capital Theory

Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986) developed Social Capital Theory, which shifts the emphasis away from individual qualifications and onto the function of social networks, contacts, and cultural resources in gaining access to employment prospects. This view argues that employability is determined not only by what graduates know, but also by who they know and the quality of their social interactions. In Malaysia, where family connections, alumni networks, and informal referrals are important in job placement, Social Capital Theory

provides a useful lens through which to assess graduate employability (Mok, 2016). Research suggests that graduates with strong professional networks and social capital have smoother transitions into employment than their peers who rely primarily on academic achievement (Mahmud & Kamaruddin, 2019). However, over-reliance on social networks may perpetuate inequalities by favouring individuals from affluent backgrounds, reducing opportunities for graduates from underserved groups (Suleman, 2018).

Employability Frameworks

Contemporary employability frameworks broaden the definition of employability beyond simply having qualifications to include a range of personal characteristics, skills, and environmental conditions. Yorke (2006) refers to employability as a set of achievements skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. Knight and Yorke (2004) proposed the USEM model (Understanding, Skills, Efficacy Beliefs, and Metacognition), which emphasises employability as a complex interplay of academic information, practical skills, self-belief, and reflective learning. In Malaysia, the Graduate Employability Blueprint (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012) takes a comprehensive approach, emphasising the importance of soft skills development, industry partnership, and job preparedness programs. Despite these efforts, gaps between higher education's desired outcomes and employer expectations persist, owing mostly to inconsistent implementation among institutions and an insufficient emphasis on experiential learning (Alias, Salleh, & Awang, 2022).

Integrated Models

Recent literature calls for integrated employability models that consider both internal and external factors influencing graduate outcomes. For example, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2017) established the Career EDGE model, which combines five essential components: career development learning, experience (work and life), degree subject knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence. This paradigm emphasizes the dynamic and multifaceted nature of employability, as well as the importance of personal development in addition to academic performance. Similarly, the model proposed by Pegg et al. (2012) suggests that employability is understood as a developmental process driven by personal circumstances, educational experiences, and labour market variables. In Malaysia, the applicability of an integrated model is particularly important due to the diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of graduates. Recent literature supports an integrated employability model that synthesizes internal and external elements. However, the transferability of Western-developed models to Malaysia should be considered with caution. Cultural characteristics such as collectivism, language barriers, and socioeconomic differences may influence how employability components combine and influence graduate outcomes (Mok, 2016; Saad, Majid, & Daud, 2021). An integrated model provides a solid foundation, but it must be adapted to include local aspects such as national policy initiatives, regional labour market situations, and sociocultural expectations. Overall, while Human Capital Theory and Social Capital Theory provide a basic perspective on employability, new frameworks and integrated models provide a more comprehensive understanding appropriate to the complex reality of Malaysian graduates. However, there is a critical need to modify and develop these models to better capture the unique challenges and possibilities that exist in the Malaysian labour market.

Theoretical Frameworks Supporting Employability

The creation of an integrated employability model requires a theoretical foundation. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) states that investment in education and training increases individual productivity and, as a result, employability. Meanwhile, Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) emphasizes the role of social networks, beliefs, and norms in promoting employment opportunities. Both theories are particularly applicable in Malaysia because employment outcomes are determined not only by individual competencies, but also by social resources and structural possibilities (Mok 2016).

Gaps in Current Research

Although significant progress has been made in understanding the factors that influence graduate employment, several gaps remain. First, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that follow graduates' career paths over time, making it difficult to estimate the long-term impact of employability programs (Saad et al., 2021). Second, research often focuses on broad national patterns without adequately addressing sector- or regional-specific differences. Finally, few studies have attempted to combine internal and external components into a coherent model that reflects the complexity of the Malaysian labour market. A systematic review of the literature suggests that graduate employability in Malaysia is a multifaceted construct influenced by personal competence, educational quality, labour market conditions, and government interventions. An integrated model that combines these different components, based on Human Capital and Social Capital theories, is essential for improving graduates' employment prospects.

Proposed Integrated Model for Graduate Employability in Malaysia

Based on insights gleaned from a comprehensive literature review, this study offers a Malaysian Integrated Graduate Employability Model (MIGEM), which aims to reflect the specific socioeconomic and educational characteristics of Malaysia. While theories such as Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), and existing employability frameworks (Yorke, 2006; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) provide valuable foundational insights, there is still an urgent need to transform the diversity and heterogeneity of the Malaysian labour market. MIGEM seeks to provide a comprehensive framework that considers academic, social, personal, and contextual aspects that influence graduate employability. The first fundamental feature of MIGEM is Human Capital Development, which is based on Becker's (1964) argument that investment in education and skills increases individual productivity and labour market value. However, Malaysian graduates must navigate an ever-changing economic environment resulting from increasing technology and globalization (World Economic Forum, 2020). To remain competitive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0), the approach emphasizes not only academic excellence but also technological skills, digital literacy, inventive thinking, and a lifelong learning mindset.

The second factor focuses on Social Capital and Networks, emphasizing the importance of professional relationships, alumni networks, internships, and industry alliances in securing employment prospects. Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) emphasized the importance of social resources in career success, and in Malaysia, networks are often crucial for job placement (Mok, 2016). As a result, MIGEM incorporates structured networking initiatives, encouraging graduates to actively develop and exploit professional relationships to enhance their employability. Personal Attributes and Emotional Intelligence are the three main components

of the model, demonstrating the increasing relevance of soft skills in the job market. According to the Career EDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), MIGEM recognizes that emotional intelligence, communication skills, resilience, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural competence are essential for employment, especially in the heterogeneous society of Malaysia. These personal characteristics not only aid in workplace integration, but also prepare graduates to negotiate the uncertainty of modern career paths.

Finally, MIGEM recognizes the impact of labour market and environmental factors. Employability is not a stand-alone concept; rather, it is influenced by broader macroeconomic conditions, government policies, industrial developments, and global competition. In Malaysia, initiatives such as the Graduate Employability Blueprint (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012) demonstrate the government's recognition of the external influences that affect graduate employment outcomes. The approach therefore includes an environmental component to ensure that graduates, educators and policymakers remain responsive to changing labour market demands. In conclusion, the Malaysian Integrated Graduate Employability Model provides a comprehensive and context-sensitive framework that considers human capital development, social networks, personal growth and external labour market factors. MIGEM presents a practical roadmap for higher education institutions, government, and graduates to promote long-term employability in Malaysia's dynamic economic landscape.

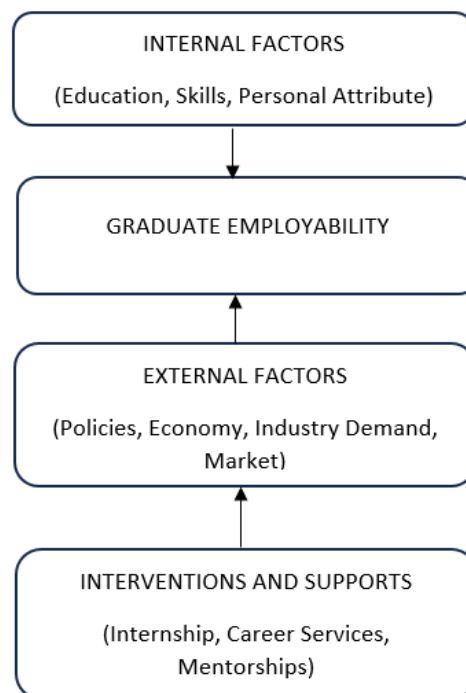


Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram of the Malaysian Integrated Graduate Employability Model (MIGEM)

Based on the literature, the integrated model of graduate employability in Malaysia is divided into three main components: internal determinants, external variables, and interventions and supports. Each of these components contributes significantly to the employment outcomes of

Malaysian graduates. The conceptual framework emphasizes graduate employability, which is directly influenced by internal and external influences. Internal elements such as education, skills, and personal characteristics form the basis of a graduate's employability. External factors such as government policies, economic conditions, industry demands, and labour market opportunities all influence and shape the environment in which graduates seek employment. Interventions and supports modulate this interaction, improving internal factors and assisting graduates in responding to external difficulties. In short, this approach emphasizes the dynamic relationship between graduates' personal growth and structural labour market conditions, aided by tailored interventions. Internal variables are characteristics that are inherent to the graduates themselves. These include educational background, such as the quality and relevance of their degree programs, as well as the reputation or accreditation of their educational institutions. Technical abilities, such as subject-specific knowledge and computer literacy, as well as soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking and adaptability, are important. In addition, personal characteristics such as drive, resilience, proactivity, work ethic and self-efficacy have a significant impact on a graduate's employment prospects. External factors, on the other hand, refer to broader systemic elements that influence graduate outcomes. Government programs, such as graduate employment initiatives and education reforms, foster a conducive climate.

The overall health of the economy and sector growth are other important factors. Employment opportunities are shaped by industry demand, particularly the need for graduates in specific industries such as information technology, engineering, and healthcare. Finally, the availability of labour market opportunities, such as graduate training programs and entrepreneurial pathways, affect employability opportunities. Interventions and supports serve as bridging mechanisms, enhancing graduates' employability. Internships provide students with practical experience, networking opportunities and opportunities to apply their academic knowledge in a real-world context. Universities provide career services such as resume workshops, job fairs, interview coaching and career counselling to help students transition into the workforce. Mentoring programs, where experienced professionals guide students, help them with both their careers and personal development. Finally, significant collaboration between industry and academia, such as curriculum creation, joint research, guest lectures, and job placements, ensure that graduates are better prepared to meet the changing demands of the workplace.

Discussion

The Malaysian Integrated Graduate Employability Model (MIGEM) was developed to provide a more nuanced understanding of graduate employability in Malaysia, which is complex and multivariate. In contrast to past employability models that were largely based on Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), MIGEM takes a broader, multidimensional approach that encompasses not only educational attainment but also social networks, personal competencies, and macroeconomic influences. Traditional models often emphasize academic qualifications and technical abilities as key predictors of employment (Harvey, 2001). However, data shows that this alone is not enough in today's volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) labour market (World Economic Forum, 2020). In contrast to existing frameworks such as the Career EDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) and the USEM model (Yorke & Knight, 2004), MIGEM adapts key elements to the Malaysian socioeconomic context, where cultural diversity, government-driven economic strategies, and industry-academic mismatch present unique challenges, (MIGEM). By explicitly incorporating Social Capital and Labour Market Environmental Factors, the model recognizes that employability is influenced not only

by individual efforts but also by institutional, relational, and structural factors. This systemic perspective is particularly important in Malaysia, as students' access to internships, professional guidance, and industry connections varies greatly based on institutional prestige and socioeconomic status (Ismail et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the emphasis on Personal Attributes and Emotional Intelligence reflects the growing labour market demand for soft skills, leadership abilities and adaptability, all of which are important for career longevity rather than job acquisition. According to a recent survey of Malaysian companies, the most important job characteristics are communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving abilities and resilience. MIGEM therefore supports a shift away from a narrow focus on academic outcomes and towards a more comprehensive graduate development paradigm that encompasses self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and cultural competence. However, the model identifies significant implementation issues. Effective implementation requires strong coordination among institutions, companies and policymakers. Curriculum revisions must strike a balance between disciplinary knowledge and employability skills while maintaining academic rigour. Institutions must invest in establishing long-term industry linkages and structured career development programmes, while governments must ensure that macroeconomic policies promote inclusive growth to attract a broad pool of graduates. Importantly, long-term studies are needed to assess the prognostic validity of MIGEM in real-world job outcomes across multiple disciplines and geographies in Malaysia.

Conclusion

This study conducted a systematic review of the literature on graduate employability before developing the Malaysian Integrated Graduate Employability Model (MIGEM) to fill a key gap in existing theories and frameworks. Unlike traditional approaches, which often isolate academic achievement as the primary measure of employability, MIGEM promotes a comprehensive integrated approach that encompasses human capital development, social networks, personal characteristics and labour market determinants. This multidimensional approach is particularly applicable in Malaysia, where structural, cultural, and institutional factors strongly influence employment outcomes. MIGEM not only broadens theoretical understanding, but also has practical implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and graduates. Universities are required to integrate employability skills into courses, establish industry linkages and develop graduates' socio-emotional competence. Policymakers are encouraged to develop supportive labour market policies to bridge the education-employment gap, while graduates must employ proactive career management tactics to negotiate an increasingly complex job market. Future research should focus on experimentally validating the MIGEM framework using quantitative and qualitative studies to investigate how its various characteristics interact to influence employability across different socioeconomic groups. Furthermore, the model may be extended to include other Southeast Asian economies with similar labour market characteristics, increasing its relevance and applicability. Overall, MIGEM offers a contemporary and context-sensitive framework for promoting graduate employability research and practice in Malaysia and elsewhere.

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