

# Working While Waiting for Government Jobs: Skill Development and Career Experiences of Graduates in Sabah's Fast-Food, Tourism, and Supermarket Industries

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## Abstract

Graduates in Sabah usually have to wait a long time before the government employment finally comes, so a lot of them work temporarily in the areas of fast food, tourism, and supermarkets. The authors of this paper are using a systematic literature review (SLR) research design to carry out a synthesis of past empirical evidence concerning the skill development, career experiences, and employability outcomes of graduates working in these industries while waiting for government jobs. The process of selecting studies was conducted according to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework and published between 2013 and 2024 the body of literature was mostly drawn from academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The review captures three main aspects: acquiring transferable skills, forming a career identity, and the perceived worth of holding a job in low- and medium-skilled service sectors. The literature indicates that despite such employment being frequently associated with job insecurity and underutilization of skills, graduates manage to attain soft skills, such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and customer management, among others, that are very helpful to their career. Besides, these experiences create resilience in the graduates and they are perceived to be practically work-ready; however, the misalignment of long-term career aspirations may lead to frustration and delay in professional progression. The review points out that there are huge contextual gaps in the literature regarding East Malaysia, particularly Sabah. The study ends with discussions of implications that arise for policymakers, higher learning institutions, and employers to assist graduate employability during the transitional employment period.

**Keyword:** Government Jobs, Skill Development, Career Experiences, Sabah's Fast-Food, Tourism

**Introduction**

The issues of graduate unemployment and underemployment still exist as major problems in Malaysia, particularly in East Malaysian states like Sabah (Abd Majid et al., 2020). Despite the fact that government employment is generally regarded as a source of job security, stable income, and social prestige, the limited number of positions available in the public sector has led to a long wait for many graduates. A large number of graduates resort to seeking work in transitional phases that last from a few months to a year (Ahmed et al., 2023). These are mainly service-oriented industries such as fast food, tourism, and supermarkets where staff turnover is high, flexible entry requirements prevail, and demand for labor is constant. All these conditions make such sectors accessible for graduates who are waiting for government job placement. Employment while waiting for public sector job, though, is a graduate a very complex and contradiction experience. To take the positive side first, the temporary job not only gives immediate money, it also lessens the financial burden on family and gives the worker a chance to experience the real-life work setting (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). On the contrary, the temporary job is often seen as not matching with the qualifications of the graduate who has taken that position hence in the eyes of the public he or she is a skilled worker, but the skills are not actually utilized and thus the person feels stagnated in his/her career and looks down upon socially. The issue is more vivid in the case of Sabah where structural economic barriers, less job opportunities for graduates, and geographical location of the graduates make the employment problem for young graduates even worse (Asefer & Abidin, 2021).

From the viewpoint of human capital and employability, if graduates take up short-term jobs in restaurants, hotels, and grocery stores, they may be able to get the right skills and also their career paths shaped the right way (Azmi et al., 2018). In addition to the above, the literature also points out that working in the service sector can help one gain such skills as communication, problem-solving, etc., and, most importantly, these skills are already recognized as being needed in both the public and the private sectors (Baldigara & Duvnjak, 2021). The debate on the degree to which such skills certification, accumulation, and conversion to career advantages is still going on in the literature. Besides, being in a non-graduate position for a long time might cause the person to lose their professional identity, motivation, and even their perception of career progression might get affected negatively (Cheng et al., 2022).

The above notwithstanding, the gap in the existing literature regarding the employability of graduates and the transitional labour experiences appears to be widening, with a few occasional studies here and there (Cheong et al., 2016). This gap is particularly evident in the case of graduates who are waiting for government jobs in the Sabah context and are working in the meantime. The existing research in this area is mostly scattered, focusing on specific sectors, or limited to urban areas of Peninsular Malaysia. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a systematic literature review to critically examine what is known about the skill development outcomes and career experiences associated with such employment (Yong & Ling, 2023). In line with that, the current article employs a systematic literature review research design to combine the various empirical studies existing on graduates' experiences in the fast-food, tourism, and supermarket sectors while waiting for government employment. This research intends to reveal the major themes, shortages, and policy and practice implications by means of systematic analysis of prior studies (Williams & Harvey, 2015). The results are meant to

guide government officials, universities, and companies in understanding the roles transitional jobs can play in developing the skills of graduates and creating sustainable career paths in Sabah.

### **Literature Review**

The transition of graduates from higher education to steady employment has been a main concern in employability and labour market studies. The research has particularly focused on graduate underemployment and transitional work (Tanius, 2018; Small et al., 2018). Underemployment refers to the situation when people occupy positions that do not require their full educational and skills potential. The phenomenon is particularly rampant in the case of people who are waiting for a secure job in the public sector. In Malaysia, government jobs are highly coveted mainly because of the security factor, good pension plans, and social standing that accompanies such jobs. Numerous studies have pointed out that long and complicated recruitment processes together with few vacancies often lead graduates to temporarily accept or take roles below their qualification, especially in the service sector, as a way to cope in the short run (Suleman et al., 2024).

The service sectors like fast food, tourism, and supermarkets have often been mentioned in the literature as the main entry points for the graduates during their labour market transition times. These industries have the characteristics of a high employee turnover rate, flexible working hours, and easy hiring. Even though the research has classified these jobs as low-skilled, they actually call for a lot of interpersonal interaction, emotional labour and efficient handling of operations (Suleman et al., 2022; Suleman et al., 2021). Hence, the graduates working in these sectors get to develop skills that can be transferred to other jobs such as communicating with customers, working in teams, settling conflicts, being flexible and managing time. These skills are very similar to the ones mentioned in the employability frameworks that underline the importance of soft skills alongside academic qualifications (Suleman, 2018; Williams & Harvey, 2015).

Nevertheless, the literature also points out that there are considerable difficulties that come along with working in such jobs for a long time. According to several surveys, the new graduates suffer from underutilization of their abilities, and this leads to their dissatisfaction with the job, diminished self-worth, and even stress (Small et al., 2018). The term "career scarring" has been brought up in this context, indicating the possible negative long-term impacts of sticking to non-graduate positions, such as getting a delayed career step up and having to accept lower pay in the end. This issue is even more serious for those graduates who consider their long-term goals to be within the professional or governmental sectors, where formal experience and credential alignment are often considered more important than informal skill acquisition (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2023). From the viewpoint of career development, transitional employment can serve two purposes.

There are contrasting views in the literature some assert that interim work is detrimental to career adaptability while others see it as an enhancement through resilience, work discipline, and exposure to organizational cultures. It is the graduates, who are actively engaged in a process of self-reflection during working hours and are able to put their skill development into words, that the service sector experience has the greatest impact on their future employability (Eurico et al., 2015). Other studies, on the other hand, indicate that if the

person is not given enough guidance, recognition, or career planning support, then the employment might lead to the reinforcement of the perception of stagnation and separation from the professional career paths (Fahimirad et al., 2019).

These experiences are also shaped by contextual factors especially in peripheral or less developed areas. A research study concentrating on East Malaysia cites that the lack of industrial diversification, limited opportunities for postgraduate education, and geographical disadvantages all contribute to the problem of graduate underemployment (Ghani, 2020). The situation is compounded in Sabah, where tourism is the main economic sector but employment in the area is frequently subject to fluctuations and being seasonal. Studies that focus on regional labour markets point out the importance of socio-economic conditions in understanding graduate career experiences since national-level conclusions may not reflect regional realities very well (Ghazali, 2010). The existing literature overall gives a good understanding of the issue of graduate underemployment, skills development, and transitional employment but it is still scattered across different fields and industries (Holidi & Abu Seman, 2023).

There is a strong absence of systematically synthesized evidence focusing on the three industries of fast food, tourism, and supermarkets where graduates are working while waiting for government jobs, especially in the context of Sabah. This underscores the importance of carrying out a systematic literature review that will not only integrate but also identify the existing findings, their commonalities, and discrepancies, and finally, enable the development of evidence-based policy and practice that would eventually support graduates in the course of the long employment transitions (Jaaffar et al., 2016).

### **Research Methodology**

The research employs a systematic literature review (SLR) design to assess the skill development and career trajectories of graduates who are employed in the fast food, tourism and supermarket sectors during the time they are waiting for government jobs in Sabah. The steps of the methodology are divided into distinct parts so as to provide transparency, replicability and rigour in terms of the methodology.

#### *Research Design*

The literature review was systematically performed in order to perform the synthesis and critical analysis of empirical and theoretical studies that are related to graduate transitional employment. The SLR method was the one chosen because it offers a systematic, extensive, and non-partisan evaluation of the literature, and thus it is possible to recognize the patterns, gaps, and major themes. Methodological consistency was maintained by the use of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework as a guide throughout the review.

#### *Data Source and Search Strategy*

A thorough literature search was performed through the academic databases like Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Emerald Insight. The search was narrowed down by the use of keywords and Boolean operators, such as graduate underemployment, waiting for government jobs, service sector employment, skill development, career experiences, tourism,

fast food, and supermarket work. The search process was iterative to make sure that all relevant studies were covered.

#### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

This systematic literature review has taken into consideration the research that has been done on graduates or degree holders working in temporary, transitional, or service-sector jobs while waiting for stable or government jobs. The eligible studies should have been published between 2013 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or credible reports in the English language and should have dealt with skill development, employability, career experiences, or underemployment. Studies were not considered if they were about non-graduates, school-leavers, or informal labour with no connection to graduate employment transitions. Also, the articles that lacked empirical evidence, clear methodological rigour, or relevance to service-sector industries were eliminated from the review.

#### *Study Selection Process and Analysis*

The PRISMA procedure was used to select the studies, namely, the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. The elimination of duplicate records was followed by the relevance check of titles and abstracts and the full-text articles were then checked against the inclusion criteria. Only the studies that met all the criteria were considered in the final review. Data relevant to the study was systematically extracted which included the study context, methodology, key findings, and implications. A thematic analysis approach was employed to combine the findings, thus allowing the identification and comparison of the recurring themes related to skill development, career identity, job satisfaction, and employability outcomes across studies.

#### *Prisma Framework Analysis*

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework presents a clear and transparent way of doing systematic literature reviews. The PRISMA flow diagram represents the steps of finding, checking, testing eligibility, and adding studies to the review, thus, assuring replicability and methodological rigor throughout the process (Jaaffar et al., 2016).

From the first search, 1,240 records were obtained which included from all the databases searched. After the removal of the 320 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the 920 articles were screened, and 810 records were excluded because they were not relevant.

The full-text examination was performed on 110 articles, and out of them, 68 were excluded for the reasons such as not targeting graduates, not having empirical data, or being dated before 2013. The final synthesis was composed of 42 studies that evidenced the skill development and career experiences of graduates waiting for government jobs in Sabah by working in the fast-food, tourism, and supermarket sectors (Jackson, 2016). The PRISMA analysis proves the systematic and no preconceptions approach of this review and at the same time makes it clear that the studies included have been through a strict selection process aimed at ensuring relevance and quality. Therefore, the process not only helps to prove the findings but also guarantees that the review will go over the current state of knowledge in this research area (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020).

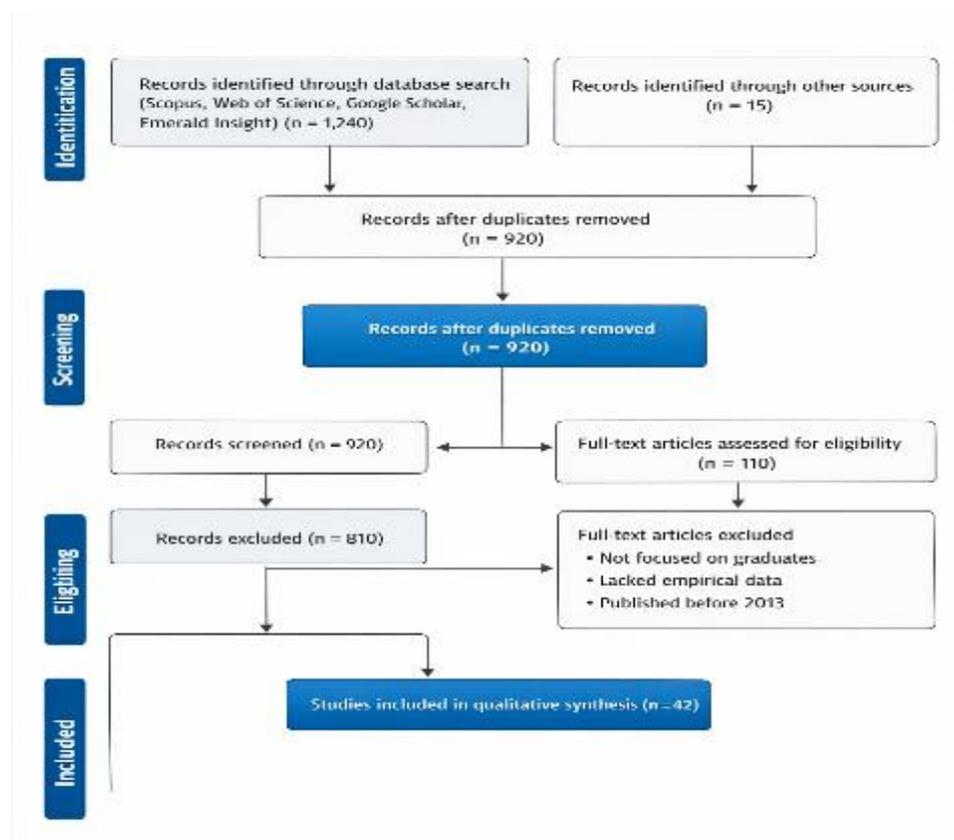


Figure 1: PRISMA analysis

### Findings and Discussion

A systematic literature review was conducted, applying the PRISMA methodology, and it provided a number of important discoveries regarding the skill development and career experiences of graduates who were working in fast-food, tourism, and supermarket sectors waiting for government jobs in Sabah (Jamaludin et al., 2019). The review of 42 studies revealed that transitional employment, though often regarded as unskilled, enables the worker to acquire transferable soft skills to a great extent. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, customer service, time management, and adaptability are some of the competencies that graduates have usually developed. These skills are critical for service sector jobs, thus, increasing the graduates' employability and preparedness for future professional positions including public-sector jobs. The research works of Ahmad et al. (2023) and Asefer and Abidin, (2021) support this view arguing that social interaction of graduates with a wide range of customers and colleagues can lead to improved emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and resilience, thus making the temporary roles more meaningful in terms of professional development.

Nonetheless, the review revealed not only positive outcomes but also considerable difficulties. A significant number of the graduates felt that their skills were not being fully exploited and experienced disappointment because of the discrepancy between their academic qualifications and the tasks assigned to them in interim positions (Jamaludin et al., 2019). Being in such jobs for a long time might result in career discontent, decreased motivation, and even a delay in career development. The difficulties are made even worse by the particular conditions of the region of Sabah, such as the scarcity of jobs suitable for

graduates, short-term work in the tourism sector, and economic limitations within the area (Kenayathulla et al., 2019).

The review, most importantly, shows that the advantages of transitional employment are realized to the fullest when the graduates intentionally reflect on their experiences and combine the skills gained at the same time with their career planning (Ladkin, 2014). This points to the necessity of different interventions such as career guidance, structured skill recognition, and policy measures indeed to facilitate graduates' employability. In general, although working in fast-food, tourism, and supermarket sectors is mostly a temporary need, it still provides a good chance for skill acquisition, resilience building, and career preparedness (Ong et al., 2022). The researchers' conclusions bring to the fore the requirement for regionally tailored approaches to make the transitional employment for the graduates of Sabah waiting for government positions more precious, thereby converting the short-term work into a meaningful career development opportunity.

### **Recommendations and Future Research**

The result of this systematic literature review has led to the recommendation of a number of actions aimed at improving the skill development and career experiences of graduates employed in the fast-food, tourism, and supermarket sectors while waiting for government jobs (Puad, 2018). To start with, there should be a partnership between policymakers and educational institutions that will introduce the way of bringing together the career guidance and skill recognition programs that will assist graduates to identify and show the transferable competencies that they have acquired through the transitional jobs (Römgens et al., 2020). This method would make it possible for the graduates to use these experiences when they are applying for either government or professional roles. The employers in the service sector should also be convinced to provide formal training, mentorship, and skill development opportunities which would help to make temporary employment in this sector more valuable in terms of long-term career progression (Scott-Knight, 2022).

It is necessary that future research fills the gaps pointed out in the literature, emphasizing particularly the regional context of Sabah. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are suggested to follow the career paths of graduates through time and to study the effect of interim employment on long-term employability, job satisfaction, and professional identity (Shariff, 2023). Moreover, it would be very enlightening to have comparative studies between graduates of different sectors and regions as they would clarify the role of transitional employment in skills acquisition and career development more profoundly (Silva et al., 2013). Furthermore, research on the psychological and socio-economic effects of underemployment and temporary work could lead to more effective policies for the support of graduates during the long waiting periods thus making the transitional employment a positive contributor to the sustainable career outcomes (Shariff & Abd Razak, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

This systematic literature review reveals the multifaceted nature of the Sabah graduates who take up temporary jobs in the fast food, tourism, and supermarket sectors while waiting for government jobs. The PRISMA-guided analysis shows that such roles are often seen as not fully using graduates' formal qualifications, but they actually offer the development of transferable skills, namely, communication, teamwork, adaptability, customer service, and

time management. These skills are not only essential for getting employed but also for being ready for a career, hence graduates are provided with the practical experience that can augment their formal education. Nevertheless, the review also brings to light difficulties like job dissatisfaction, mismatch of skills, and career scarring, especially when temporary work goes on for a long time without being recognized or aligned with one's long-term career goals. The context in Sabah, with its limited opportunities at the graduate level, coupled with the general economic limitations in the region, is a further factor that influences these experiences. In a nutshell, the findings indicate that the employment of policy measures, career guidance, and skills recognition programs is crucial to shifting transitional employment from being a hindrance to a strategic platform for sustainable graduate career development.

### **Research Contribution**

The current research, however, presents various theoretical and contextual contributions that are rather important and should be recognized within the context of the existing literature concerning graduate employability and transitional employment. One of the main points of the discussion is that with regard to the human capital and employability theories, the review has broadened their scope by evidencing that non-graduate and service sector jobs can work as informal albeit significant avenues for skill accumulation and career identity formation, especially in the case of those waiting for public sector jobs for a long time. The research has concluded that graduates and their employers are often viewed as incapable of communicating their needs and using institutional career services. This widely accepted view of graduate-level skill development being confined to professional or formal career-track roles has been challenged through the incorporation of studies concerning transferable skill development, resilience, and employing outcomes. The study also draws attention to the importance of experiential learning in the low to mid-skilled sectors of the service industry, thus contributing to the ongoing discussions about underemployment, career scarring, and skills overturn.

The research presented here is quite timely in view of the data availability limitation since it delves into East Malaysia, particularly Sabah, which has been a less talked about region in the literature concerning graduate employment. This review contrasts with the previous ones which were mainly focused on the urban and industrial areas of Peninsular Malaysia in that it highlights the structural, economic and geographical factors that basically determine the work experiences of graduates in Sabah during their transition period. In this way, it opens up region-specific insights that are of great importance for the policymakers, higher education institutions, and employers who are planning to carry out employability interventions targeting particular regions. The study, on the whole, is a step towards a broader and more context-sensitive understanding of graduate transitions, where temporary employment in the service sector is not just seen as a stopgap solution but rather as a potential strategic platform for sustainable career development when supported by the right interventions.

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