

The Relationship between Industrial Work Practices and Employer Satisfaction with Higher Education Graduates

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the impact of industrial work practices to employer satisfaction towards higher education graduate domicile from Sabah, Malaysia perspective specifically working in public and private sectors. The research is intended to address concerns that graduates tend not to have what it takes in the workplace even when armed with sufficient academic knowledge. **Design/methodology/approach:** The research used a quantitative approach with a questionnaire instrument administered to 80 employers drawn from the private and government sector. Employer satisfaction was analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multiple regression to determine the influence of work practices in industry. **Findings:** Industrial practices appear to be influential in determining employer satisfaction Findings. In the private sector, adaptability and instrumental skills were highlighted as important, while in the public sector formal qualifications and rule-based knowledge were preferred by employers. It was also discovered that the organization of work in manufacturing industries and employer sector is related to lower-level satisfaction. **Research limitations/implications:** The sampling was only 80 employers in Sabah which may influence generalizability. Cross-sectional data reflect perceptions at a single period, and other sectors (e.g., NGOs or multinational corporations) were excluded. **Practical implications:** Highlights the value of including structured industrial training within tertiary curricula and working towards stronger form of universities links with industry partners in order to prepare graduates more effectively for industry needs. **Originality/value:** This study adds to our knowledge on how industrial work practices impact employer satisfaction in both public and private sectors, highlighting sector-specific idiosyncrasies in graduates' readiness for the workplace and employability.

Keywords: Industrial Work Practices, Employer Satisfaction, Public and Private Sectors, Graduate Employability

Introduction

The issue of higher education graduates not being able to gain suitable employment is still a concern and issue most countries face and Malaysia is no exception. Most employers are of the view that graduates do not possess a good balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills essential to succeed in a real work situation (Mustapa & Ali, 2024a). The effectiveness of industry work practices, including internships, industrial placements and Co-op education programmes has been identified as key indicators for the graduate's employability (Ali & Jack, 2019). Introduction Malaysian higher education which encompasses both public institutions (*IPTA*) and private institutions (*IPTS*) is responsible for producing graduates with a variety of career opportunities. But in order for classroom learning to leap into the world of work, academic studies -- nothing but an abstract idea -- have to translate into industry practices. Studies have revealed that most employers' place importance on adaptability in the workplace, as well as on communication and problem-solving abilities acquired through the industry rather than only learned academically (Mustapa & Ali, 2024b; Tang, 2021).

In Sabah, such demand for industry-ready graduates is even more ubiquitous as the state moves into other sectors like tourism, manufacturing and services. Local studies indicate that employers in Sabah are quick to point out the practical readiness of graduates as a satisfaction determinant when recruiting (Ali & Jack, 2019). These results support an international agenda calling on higher education to forge closer relationships with industry in order to improve graduate skills development and workplace integration (Nguyen et al., 2022). This study focuses on examining the industry work practices of employer satisfaction on higher education graduates in Sabah. The paper also examines the moderation effect of the nature of employer sector (public/private/non-government) on this relationship. By addressing this question, the research therefore makes a theoretical and practical contribution in terms of enhancing our understanding of ways in which work-based learning programmes might contribute to employer satisfaction with graduates and graduate employability more generally.

This paper seeks to investigate the association between industrial work practices and employability of higher education graduates in Sabah. The study also examines whether the nature of employer sector which is public and private moderates this linkage. By examining this issue, the research has both theoretical and practical applications as it enhances current knowledge of how industry-based learning experiences enhance employer satisfaction and graduate employability.

Research has consistently demonstrated that employer expectations differ markedly between public and private sector organisations. Private-sector employers tend to prioritise attributes such as adaptability, innovation, and hands-on competencies, while public-sector organisations often place greater emphasis on academic credentials, procedural compliance, and rule-based knowledge. These structural and cultural differences imply that industrial work practices may not exert a uniform influence on employer satisfaction across sectors. In the context of Sabah, where organisational environments and labour market demands vary substantially between the public and private domains, this distinction becomes particularly salient. Accordingly, integrating *employer sector* as a moderating variable is theoretically appropriate and empirically necessary to determine whether the strength of the relationship

between industrial work practices and employer satisfaction differs across organisational contexts. This moderating perspective allows the study to provide a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of graduate employability in Sabah.

Literature Review

Industrial Work Practices

Work-based education are widely recognized as mechanisms for enhancing graduate job preparedness (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021). These placements give students the opportunity to be able to apply the theory learned into a real-world scenario, hence developing soft skills including adaptability, teamwork and problem-solving (Nguyen et al., 2022). In Malaysia, the industrial training is a compulsory component under Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA) in higher learning institution to produce graduates with competencies required by the employers (Kasim et al., 2020). There is evidence that industrial work placements contribute to better employability outcomes, such as transition from school to work, job performance, and employer satisfaction (Yusof et al., 2021). Research also finds that such placements enable students to establish networking and identity, which it has been claimed is crucial for long-term career progression (Smith et al., 2022).

Employer Satisfaction

Satisfaction of employer is believed to be the existence between graduates and employer in some corresponding field, especially for foundation knowledge and soft skills needed while joining employment (Mustapa & Ali, 2024a). In addition, many studies have revealed that employers frequently believe that graduates are deficient in terms of workplace competencies like communication, leadership and practical problem-solving (Succi & Canovi, 2020). This “employability gap” persists in the workplace from different contexts, emphasizing the need for alignment between higher education learning and industry requirements (Tran & Pham, 2021). Within the Malaysian transition context industry, employer satisfaction has been examined in various sectors within which findings are quite unanimous around that work practices by industries contribute significantly to the perceptions of readiness on part of graduates (Ali & Jack, 2019). Mustapa and Ali (2024b) formulated a model that emphasizes the role of academic background as well as education that is based on industry approximately graduates. Their results emphasise role of industry-academic partnerships in reducing skill gaps.

Moderating Role of Employer Sector

The profile of employer expectations varies enormously by sectoral context. For example, private company employers' emphasise on adaptability and innovation as well as applied knowledge while public sector value on compliance, procedural skills and academic knowledge (Mustapa & Ali, 2024a). Likewise, NGOs may value social responsibility and community involvement. In Malaysia, the level of sector differences may have implications for the relations between graduate attributes and employer satisfaction (Yusof et al., 2021).

In the private sector of Sabah, Ali and Jack (2019) established that employers gave emphasis to applied readiness skills especially in hospitality and business courses but on the other hand employers from the public sector was more concern about academic quality and following standard protocol. These distinctions indicate that sectoral context cannot be ignored when interpreting the results of industrial work practices.

Research Gap

Despite ongoing research on employability and employers satisfaction, very little research has been done in the context of Sabah, where the economic and education profile differs from Peninsular Malaysia. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on the moderation effect of employer sector in the industry work practices and employer satisfaction perspective. It is important to fill this gap, since the result can help higher educational institutions align their programs with the variety of employers' needs in the area.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded on the relationship between industrial work practices and employer satisfaction among graduates of higher education institutions in Sabah. Work-based learning is portrayed as an organized and industry-contextualized experience (e.g., internship, work-training, project) which allow students to be in real work environments. In this regard, employer satisfaction reflects the extent to which employers find graduates to be capable, malleable and congruent with organizational goals.

In this model, industrial work practices are the independent variable and employer satisfaction is the dependent variable. The connection between these two constructs is moderated by employer sector, i.e., public and private employing organization. The private employers are more concerned with flexibility, situational skills and dynamism whereas the public employers focus on educational background school qualifications and procedures expertise. The model then suggests that the relationship between industrial work practices and employer satisfaction should be dependent upon IECT sector.

In this conceptualisation practical training was the core contributory factor in enhancing graduate employability with employer expectations differing by sector but being used to mould overarching satisfaction levels. It forms the structural basis for tested hypotheses in this study.

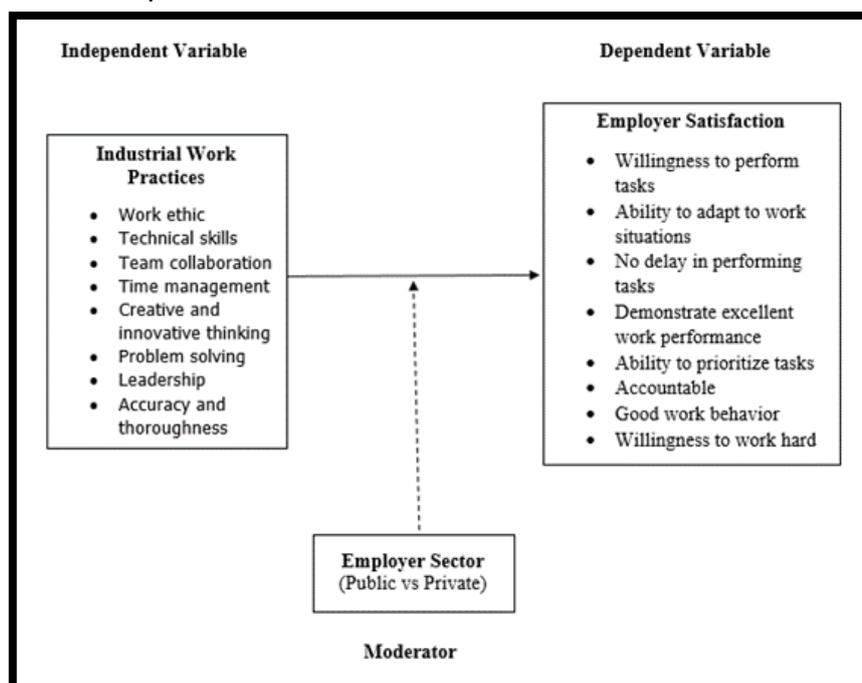


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Hypothesis Development

The significance of work practices in industry as an avenue in improving the employability among graduates has been well documented globally and locally to Malaysia (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). These experiences help students connect theory with application in the workplace and can enhance skills like teamwork, communication and adaptability. These competencies are commonly considered by employers as signs of the readiness of graduates and so influence their general satisfaction towards the hiring process (Mustapa & Ali, 2024b). Gomez protecting virtue of alumni and satisfaction of employee, It has been developed to measure the extent to which graduates meet the organisation expectation in knowledge, skill and work place behavior. (Succi & Canovi,.2020). In areas like Sabah, where the economy is fast growing and diversifying into services, manufacturing and tourism industry sectors (Jamaludin & Ezlika, 2017), there are increasing employer expectations that graduates have applied expertise that can be developed through signed industrial training programme (Ali & Jack, 2019). Accordingly, it can be postulated that efficient industrial work practices will exert a positive and significant impact on employer satisfaction.

Furthermore, the literature also shows that employer demand is not uniform by sector. Private organizations have an orientation more toward practical preparedness, innovation and adaptiveness, whilst public organizations habits on academic underpinning of knowledge and meeting procedural demands (Mustapa & Ali, 2024a). From these divergent accounts, it is reasonable to suggest that the strength of the correlation between industrial work practices and employer satisfaction might differ by type of employer sector. This indicates that sectoral context may moderate the association.

Based on these arguments, two hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Industrial work practices have a positive and significant relationship with employer satisfaction with higher education graduates.

H2: The relationship between industrial work practices and employer satisfaction is moderated by employer sector, such that the strength of the relationship varies between public and private sectors.

Theoretical Framework

The theory-based foundation of the studies is built upon three interrelated theories. First, according to the Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), investment in education and training leads to increased productivity and performance. In this study, work-based learning in industry is perceived as an investment in human capital which adds to the employability of graduates and leads to higher levels of employer satisfaction. Recent studies (e.g., Mustapa & Ali, 2024; Arifin & Abdullah, 2021) confirm that employers appreciate graduates who possess practical and transferable skills obtained through on-the-job training.

Second, through the theory of employability (Yorke, 2006), we know that their recognition in the labour-market goes beyond academic achievements, depending on soft skills and work based learnings. Work experience in industry can provide good base for developing key problem-solving, human communication and teamwork skills that employers seek. This theory accords with the notion that exposure to work-based environments is likely to enhance graduates' readiness for, and performance in, transitioning into employment.

A third theory is the Person–Environment Fit Theory (Kristof-Brown, et al., 2005) that focuses on how competencies of individuals are consistent with characteristics of organizations. Applying this theory, the present analysis investigates sectoral variation in employer satisfaction. Public sector institutions may place a higher demand on conformity and educational credentials, as opposed to private sector employers that look for versatility and tangible skills. Hence, employer sector moderates the relationship between industrial work practices and satisfaction as postulated by this theory.

Together, these theories offer a strong base to understand the processes by which industrial work practices influence employer satisfaction and how this relationship differs across sectors of organizations.

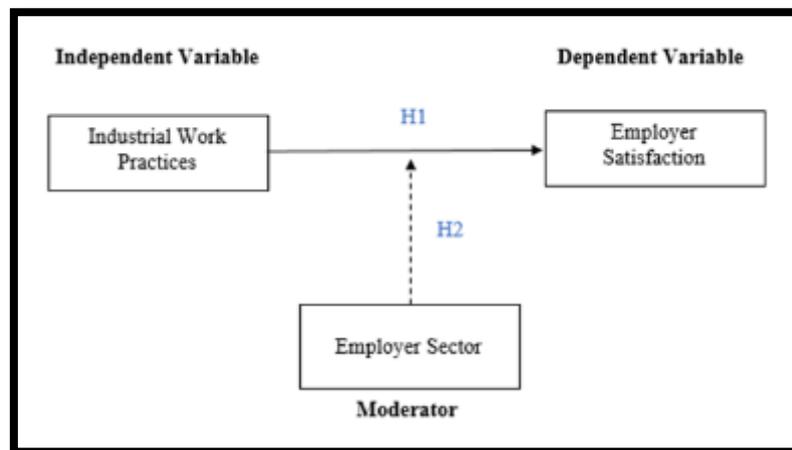


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework

Methods

Research Design

Descriptive cross-sectional survey used a quantitative research design. This study design is appropriate for exploring associations over time between variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2020).

Population and Sample

This study was aimed at employers whether from the government, private or NGO sectors within Sabah who had experience in supervising IPTA and IPTS graduates. A purposive sampling technique was employed and 80 responses were obtained. This represented an adequate sample size for regression analysis as suggested by Hair et al. (2021).

Data Collection Method

The data were collected via standardised questionnaires posted online. We developed items for measuring industry work practices and employer satisfaction from scales that were verified in previous studies (Nguyen & Tran, 2020; Mohd-Yusof et al., 2022).

Measures

Industrial Work Practices (IWP): Assessed based on knowledge transfer, flexibility, social skills and problem solving (5 point Likert scale).

Employer Satisfaction (ES): Assessed as overall performance of a graduate, how prepared they are for the job and how well they meet company needs (5 levels Likert scale).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data Analysis was performed using SPSS v29. The respondents' demographic characteristics were described using descriptive statistics. Pearson correlation examined the relationship between IWP and ES, and regression analysis verified the predictive impact. Cronbach's alpha was used for the test of reliability and values above 0.70 were considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2021).

Inclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and validity of the data collected, the study applied specific inclusion criteria to identify eligible respondents. Employers were included if they met the following conditions:

1. Currently employed within a public, private, or non-governmental organisation in Sabah, ensuring geographical relevance to the study's scope.
2. Possess direct supervisory, evaluative, or managerial experience with graduates from IPTA or IPTS within the past five years.
3. Hold a role involving decision-making or assessment of employee performance, such as managerial, human resource, or supervisory positions.
4. Demonstrate sufficient familiarity with graduates' industrial training, workplace performance, or job readiness, enabling informed evaluations of employer satisfaction.

Employers who did not meet these criteria particularly those without experience working with higher education graduates or those not based in Sabah were excluded from participation.

Findings

There were 80 employers involved in this study, who came from different industries in Sabah. The demographic profiles of the respondents are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 80)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Employer Sector	Public	35	43.75
	Private	65	81.25
Years of Experience	< 5 years	12	15.0
	5–10 years	28	35.0
	11–20 years	25	31.3
	> 20 years	15	18.7

Demographics The respondents are distributed between public (43.75%) and private (81.25%) organizations although profile of the organizations still does differ according to organisational type (Table 1). A higher percentage of employers also had 10 or more years of experience (50%), suggesting that their perception was grounded on significant professional exposure.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Industrial Work Practices	4.12	0.68	2.5	5.0
Employer Satisfaction	4.05	0.72	2.8	5.0

Descriptive (Univariate) The descriptive analysis in Table 2 shows that employers give quite a high assessment for both the industrial work practices of the graduates (M = 4.12, SD = 0.68) and graduate satisfaction to employer (M = 4.05, SD=0.72). This suggests that employer perspectives in both sectors would value applied training and exposure to industry.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix (Pearson Correlation)

Variables	IWP	SS	TI	ES
IWP	1	.624**	.318**	.587**
SS	.624**	1	.275*	.612**
TI	.318**	.275*	1	.241*
ES	.587**	.612**	.241*	1

The Pearson correlation coefficients between the focal variables are reported in Table 3. There was a strong positive relationship of IWP with ES ($r = .587, p < 0.01$) (higher employer satisfaction is associated with high- quality industry exposure). SS were also highly correlated with employer satisfaction ($r = .612$), a result indicative of the relevance of social and problem solving skills in graduates. Type of institution (TI) was found to have a moderate correlation with employer satisfaction ($r = .241, p < 0.05$), with little variation across employer perceptions in public and private universities appearing perceivable. Also, IWP and SS were significantly correlated ($r = .624, p < 0.01$), indicating that the on-job training helps to improve soft-skills of graduates.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Results: Industrial Work Practices and Employer Satisfaction

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Industrial Work Practices	0.58	0.09	0.61	6.44	0.000 **
Employer Sector (Public=0, Private=1)	0.22	0.11	0.18	2.01	0.048 *
Interaction (Work Practices × Sector)	0.15	0.07	0.20	2.14	0.036 *

Model Fit: $R^2 = 0.48$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$, $F(3, 76) = 23.29, p < 0.001$

*Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

As the result of regression analysis (refer to Table 4), industrial work practices effectively predicts employer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.61, p < 0.01$), thus reiterating that practical training is an important key in determining how employers view the graduates. Employer sector exhibits a similarly pronouncing effect ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.05$) where employers rooted in the private sector is more likely to indicate satisfaction with graduates' adaptability and hands-on readiness than those in the public sector. Moreover, the interaction term is significantly positive ($\beta = 0.20, p < 0.05$), suggesting that the link between industrial work practices and employer satisfaction is stronger in either sector. There was a moderate to strong fit of the overall model (adjusted $R^2 = 0.46$) which accounted for 46% of variance in employer satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study provide evidence suggesting that the industrial working practices have a significant effect on employer satisfaction of tertiary graduates in Sabah. The positive and significant relationship between the two variables reaffirms earlier studies which argue that field exposure to OJT provides graduates with practical competences which cannot be acquired entirely in a classroom environment (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). Students have more chances to apply theory into practice and learn from the combination of theory and practice, which would benefit for their employment.

There is also evidence that the nature of the employer sector moderates industrial work practices and employer satisfaction. Notably, private sector employer are more satisfied with higher education graduates who have industrial experience than their public sector counterpart. This result is consistent with the extant literature demonstrating that private firms are known to post their needs on adaptability, transferable skills and innovation (Ali & Jack, 2019; Mustapa & Ali, 2024a). Public sector employers, on the other hand, have a preference for academic knowledge and conformity to practice norms which helps to account for why professional work practices has less of an effect on satisfaction in public as opposed to industry settings.

They also support Mustapa and Ali's (2024b) framework where employer satisfaction is a function of graduates' academic preparation and hands-on experiences with the world of work. The current analyses add to their work by testing from empirical data the moderating effect of employer sector.

In summary, this study supports the significance of industry work practices (in both curriculum and pedagogy) in mediating the divide between Universities outcomes and labour market requirements. Both private and public sector employers appreciate industry training, but the effect on satisfaction varies. Private-sector employers, operating in a competitive and continually changing environment, are more focused on graduates' practical competency. Public employers, however, still value academic grounding along with professional conduct.

In sum, this article offers original insight by demonstrating that the importance of industry work practices and sector context cannot be understated when it comes to shaping employer satisfaction. The results suggest the imperative for higher education institutions to work with industry to design programs that integrate academic and practical training.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research has several theoretical implication on Higher Education students employment and employers' satisfaction. First, it provides empirical support for the claim that industrial work practices significantly predict employer satisfaction, thus enhancing the evidence on work readiness as being not just dependent upon academic success but also edge learning (Nguyen et al., 2022; Succi & Canovi, 2020). The recognition of the powerful influence of industrial work practices contributes to emerging models of employability which stress more heavily as a tripartite that incorporates knowledge, skills and attitudes (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021).

Second, the results extend theoretical discussions by exposing the moderating effect of employer sector. Couper, Morrison, and Ali (2004a) build on this framework and Mustapa and Ali (2024b); which recognizes that framing of the context influenced employer perceptions but scant empirical evidence was supplied to test this construct. This analysis demonstrates that employer sector does in fact moderate the relationship between industrial work practices and satisfaction, with private employers valuing applied skills more highly than their public counterparts.

In the third place, it contributes to the literature on regional graduate employability because of the focus on Sabah (a context which is under-represented in the literature). The majority of the studies about Malaysian higher education concentrates on peninsular Malaysia and compared with it, assessing employer satisfaction in Sabah brings understanding which includes local industry situation, labour market requirements and institutional factors (Ali & Jack, 2019). This region-specific focus enriches theoretical knowledge by highlighting the impact of localised conditions on graduate outcomes.

In sum, we contribute to theory as we combine industry work routines with employer satisfaction and sector context in a framework. This provides a more detailed account of what other ways higher educational institutions can utilize to better prepare graduates for a variety of employer expectations across sectors.

Practical and Social Implications

The results of this study have several significant implications for colleges/universities, employers, and policy makers.

For Higher Education Institutions (Public Higher Education Institutions (IPTA) and Private Higher Education Institutions (IPTS)).

The findings show the need for better integration of industry work practices into curricula. There should not only be mandatory internships but they also have to be of the right quality and relevance. Strong engagement with industry partners is necessary to ensure training experiences meet the demands of the labor market. In this way, students in the form of you can develop real competencies required by employers such as adaptability, teamwork and problem solving (Mustapa & Ali, 2024a).

For Employers

Employers - Private Sector Employers, particularly those in the private sector have played a vital role in terms of determining "employee-ability." Feedback loops between employers and IPTA and IPTS can ensure the relevance of industry training programs to actual organizational skill needs. For public sector employers, this implies a need to review expectations to use academic knowledge as well as practical know-how in an attempt to enhance overall graduate satisfaction.

For Policymakers

Policymakers in the higher education and workforce development arms of government should reinforce incentives for university-industry cooperation. To align industry work practices towards meaningful graduate preparedness, these may be supported by inducements for private sector to cater for trainees, and established parameters to ensure

quality of training is consistent. Moreover, industry-specific training programs can be established to accommodate the needs of public and private employers.

For Society

More generally, more efficient industrial work practices pave the way for social and economic growth. The higher the number of graduates with jobs, lower the unemployment and higher the productivity and innovation in companies. In Sabah, the diversification process in economy is taking place while there are still imbalances among industries that will reflect into the job situation as well (Ali & Jack, 2019). With these differences in industry expectations we need to connect higher education programmes with what industries expects which makes producing work-ready graduates indispensable if growth will be achieved across sectors such as tourism, education and services.

The pragmatic and the social implications Overall, it is clear that this challenges should be faced through a system where *IPTA* and *IPTS*, employers and policymakers are involved. Such partnership will enable industry practices to be a strong vehicle for improving graduate-ready work and address needs of an expanding workforce.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

One, the research was limited to employers in the private and public sector of Sabah, Malaysia. Although such a regional focus is informative, this could mean the results of the study have limited applicability in other states or countries with different labour market conditions and employer' preferences. Second, the information was obtained using survey questions, which may be affected by biases including social desirability and a respondent's ability to remember. Third, although work practices in the industry were examined for potential confounding, differences between training settings (performance, duration and quality of experiences within different educational institutions and organizations) were not accounted for. Differences of this type may have affected levels of satisfaction among employers.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research may wish to extend the geographic scope of study by examining not only multiple regions but conducting cross-county comparisons in order to learn more about how work practices within a industry segment influence employer satisfaction across contexts. This longitudinal research can follow graduates through their preparation, participation and post-placement experiences in industry to build up a more obviously integrated account of how skills are acquired and applied. Second, researchers may investigate the extent to which training quality (e.g., mentoring, workload, and exposure to real organizational challenges) determines employer satisfaction. We also think the comparison of public and private universities in how they prepare students to enter the job market through their industrial training programs is another promising area. The qualitative effectiveness of the programs could also be examined with a mixed methods design including interviews with graduates AND employers.

Addressing these limitations and pursuing new areas of inquiry will enable academics to better understand the industrial work practices that enhance graduate employability and meet employer satisfaction across labour market disparities.

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