

UNDERGRADUATE CAREER EXPLORATION: PRELIMINARY INSIGHT FROM A KLANG VALLEY PRIVATE INSTITUTION

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Abstract. Graduate employment remains a persistent global concern, with governments, institutions, and employers continuously seeking effective measures to enhance employability among university graduates. In Malaysia, this issue has gained significant attention as the rapidly changing job market demands graduates who are not only academically qualified but also equipped with relevant skills, knowledge, and adaptability. One critical step toward addressing this concern is understanding how undergraduate students perceive and engage in career exploration, as their perspectives can offer meaningful insights for the development of practical strategies to strengthen employability. This preliminary study aimed to examine the factors that influence undergraduate career exploration, and the challenges students face in preparing for the workforce. The study involved three final-year undergraduate students from a private higher education institution in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, who shared their experiences and personal reflections. The findings suggest that social media platforms play a pivotal role in students' job search process, serving as the most accessible and widely used source for information on career opportunities. However, the participants also highlighted concerns regarding the gap between employers' expectations and their own perceived competencies. This mismatch often creates anxiety and uncertainty as students transition into the labor market. Overall, the study sheds light on several challenges encountered by final-year undergraduates in navigating their career pathways. By identifying these issues, the research emphasizes the importance of equipping students with relevant skills, resources, and guidance to enhance their employability and better prepare them for the demands of the job market.

Keywords: *career exploration, undergraduate students, Malaysia, graduate employability*

Introduction

Graduate unemployment continues to be a pressing global concern, raising concerns for policymakers, higher education institutions, and employers. As economies evolve into knowledge-based and technology-driven systems, the expectations placed on graduates extend beyond academic knowledge to include problem-solving, adaptability, communication, and digital skills. However, many graduates worldwide still struggle to transition successfully into the labor market, pointing to ongoing gaps between higher education outcomes and industry requirements. In Malaysia, this concern has been particularly evident in recent years. The Graduate Tracer Study report by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE, 2024) revealed that 7.5% of fresh graduates were unemployed within six months of completing their studies. While this marked a slight improvement compared to the previous year, the figure still highlights 14,870 graduates struggling to secure employment soon after graduation. More concerning, however, are issues of underemployment. The Graduate Statistics 2023, published by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2022), reported that 1.68 million graduates were employed in semi-skilled jobs, indicating that many of them are unable to secure positions that match their qualifications. This mismatch not only undermines graduates'

career trajectories but also reflects inefficiencies in the alignment between higher education and labor market needs.

Beyond unemployment statistics, employers in Malaysia have consistently voiced concerns regarding the competencies of fresh graduates. Employers commented that fresh graduates often lack communication, problem-solving, and analytical skills (Nadarajah, 2021). Similar concerns have been raised in studies emphasizing the importance of soft skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and English language proficiency (Sharma, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2014). These concerns suggest that in today's competitive environment, a degree certificate is no longer sufficient to guarantee employment. Students must demonstrate broader employability skills and actively engage in preparing for their future careers during their undergraduate years. A critical area of focus in this preparation process is career exploration. Career exploration can be broadly defined as the process of gathering information about oneself and about potential occupations to facilitate career decision-making. It is a proactive career management behavior that involves two interconnected domains: self-exploration and environmental exploration. Self-exploration refers to the understanding of personal strengths, values, and interests, while environmental exploration focuses on acquiring information about job opportunities, labor market expectations, and industry requirements (Hirschi et al., 2013). Engaging in career exploration helps students identify opportunities, evaluate their skills and competencies, and assess their fit with career options. Most importantly, it enhances their career adaptability, increases confidence, and supports more positive long-term outcomes in the labor market (Chen et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2021).

The importance of career exploration is further reinforced in several theoretical frameworks. Super (1957) "Life-Span, Life-Space Theory", suggests that individuals engage in various vocational tasks across different life stages, with exploration being particularly prominent between the ages of 15 and 24. This period is crucial for developing self-concept and career adaptability, making undergraduate years a pivotal time for career exploration. Similarly, Coetzee (2022) emphasizes the role of career awareness, arguing that students who possess greater awareness of career options are more likely to adopt a mindset of adaptivity, thereby enhancing their readiness to embrace career-related challenges. This adaptive mindset motivates students to actively explore career opportunities, while those with lower career awareness often delay exploration, leading to indecision and limited preparedness. Research also identifies personal and social factors as important influences on career exploration. Personality traits such as proactivity, grit, and resilience have been shown to encourage students' active participation in exploration. Proactive individuals are more likely to initiate and engage in career exploration activities, such as attending career fairs, seeking mentors, and engaging in career workshops (Darmayanti and Salim, 2020). They take deliberate actions to change their environments and reduce barriers. These behaviors enhance career development by increasing career decision-making self-efficacy and reducing anticipated regret (Yu et al., 2021). Grit and resilience are also crucial in determining engagement in career exploration. Gritty individuals are clear about their passions and goals, which motivates them to explore career paths and cope with the difficulties encountered during the process (Li et al., 2021). Moreover, they exhibit a stronger ability in self-regulation, whether in managing thoughts, emotions, or behaviors. Given the ups and downs of the career exploration journey, self-regulation skills further help

them to persist (Gupta and Sudhesh, 2019). These internal resources empower students to stay engaged in exploration even in the face of uncertainty.

While personality is crucial in shaping career exploration, environmental factors like social support are equally important in influencing students' participation in this journey. Social support is particularly vital for individuals with socially oriented personalities, as greater support encourages increased involvement in career-related activities (Wang et al., 2019). Additionally, receiving assistance and support from others can help reduce potential barriers to career exploration. Various parties, such as parents, friends, and teachers, are instrumental in shaping career exploration by offering valuable information and guidance (Kayani et al., 2022). However, social networks can be a double-edged sword, as they both facilitate and hinder an individual's career exploration. For instance, individuals may become demotivated when they receive negative comments about their career choices, leading to a withdrawal from career exploration (Hu et al., 2018). Over-reliance on advice from others may inhibit an individual's independence in decision-making and reduce their involvement in career exploration. Educational structures and school-level strategies also shape career exploration. Unfortunately, career guidance at the school level often overemphasizes making the "right" choices and prioritizing academic performance, while neglecting deeper mechanisms that foster career awareness and adaptability (Chen et al., 2021). Teachers, burdened by heavy workloads, may have limited capacity to address these issues in depth. This lack of comprehensive support leaves many students underprepared for the career exploration process as they transition into higher education. Moreover, indecisiveness and external pressures exacerbate the stress associated with entering the workforce, while negative feedback can demotivate students and hinder effective decision-making (Islam et al., 2020).

Given the evolving economic and social landscapes, there is a pressing need to explore the factors that influence career exploration among Malaysian undergraduates, particularly final-year students who are nearing their transition into the workforce. Understanding the challenges that hinder students from engaging in career exploration is equally important for designing effective interventions. By examining these dynamics, higher education institutions and policymakers can develop comprehensive strategies that not only enhance students' employability but also ensure that graduates are better aligned with labor market needs. This study therefore, investigates how final-year undergraduate students in a private institution in Klang Valley approach career exploration, the factors that influence their exploration, and the challenges they encounter. The findings will expand understanding of career exploration within the Malaysian context and provide valuable insights for developing interventions that support students in navigating their career pathways more effectively.

Materials and Methods

The present study employs an instrumental case study design to explore how final-year students engage in career exploration within the Malaysian context. According to Hunter et al. (2019), an instrumental case study enables researchers to investigate a phenomenon in depth while situating it within its real-life context. This design was considered appropriate because the focus of the research extended not only to the individual participants but also to the broader phenomenon of career exploration as experienced by undergraduates nearing graduation. Case study research is particularly

suitable for exploring complex social processes such as decision-making and career development, as it allows for multiple perspectives and rich descriptions of lived experiences. The study involved three final-year undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology program at a private higher education institution located in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who were in their final semester and preparing to transition into the workforce. Recruitment was conducted through an advertisement shared via internal student communication channels. Interested students who met the eligibility criteria were contacted and briefed about the study's aims and procedures. As summarized in *Table 1*, the participants consisted of two males and one female, all of Chinese ethnicity and aged 23. Two participants had prior working experience, while one had not yet engaged in formal employment. All three were actively searching for career opportunities following the completion of their industrial training, making them suitable informants for the study. Although the sample size was small, it was sufficient for a qualitative case study aimed at gaining depth of understanding rather than generalizability (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Table 1. Summary of the participants' background.

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Program
A	23	Chinese	Male	Psychology
B	23	Chinese	Male	Psychology
C	23	Chinese	Female	Psychology

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that provides both structure and flexibility. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to cover predetermined themes while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on issues they consider important (Magaldi and Berler, 2020). An interview protocol was developed, focusing on four broad areas: students' career plans, methods of career exploration, factors influencing their exploration, and challenges encountered. The protocol was reviewed by two subject experts in educational psychology and career development to ensure its relevance and clarity. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet meeting room on campus between March 2 and March 10, 2023. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Before each interview, participants were briefed on the objectives of the study and their rights as research participants, including voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and assurance of confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The use of open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences in their own words, thereby capturing the richness and nuance of their perspectives.

The current study employed an inductive content-analysis approach, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify patterns and generate themes from participants' responses (Anandarajan et al., 2019). Analysis began with data familiarization, where the researcher read and reread the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding. Next, data reduction was carried out by identifying significant statements and coding them into meaningful categories. These categories were then grouped to form broader themes related to career exploration, influencing factors, and challenges. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a second researcher independently reviewed the emerging themes and coding scheme. Differences were discussed until consensus was achieved, thereby strengthening the reliability of the findings. The manual approach to coding was chosen to allow close engagement with

the data, which is important in exploratory studies where subtle nuances may otherwise be overlooked. In qualitative research, trustworthiness is essential to ensure that the findings are credible. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants were invited to review summaries of their interview responses to confirm accuracy. The role of reflexivity was also acknowledged. The researcher who conducted the interviews was also involved in data analysis and, as an educator in a private institution in Klang Valley, brought prior experiences that could potentially influence interpretations. By maintaining reflexive notes, the researcher continuously reflected on their assumptions and sought to minimize bias. This practice enhanced the transparency and trustworthiness of the research process. The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. By prioritizing participants' rights and well-being, the study upheld the ethical standards expected in qualitative research.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented according to the main focus areas: future career plans, methods of career exploration, influencing factors, and challenges faced. Each theme that emerged from participants' narratives is supported by direct quotations from participants to illustrate their perspectives.

Future career plans

All three participants identified specific fields they wished to pursue in the future, despite sharing the same academic background in psychology. Their aspirations ranged from working in customer service and human resources to pursuing opportunities in fields related to events and the food and beverage industry. Participant A described a preference for more interactive and outgoing roles:

“I prefer like outgoing, like some event of like F&B field. I don't want to sit in an office the whole day doing repetitive work. I think I'm more suitable for something dynamic where I can interact with people and manage events.”

Participant B envisioned a pathway in customer service, emphasizing the importance of communication and interpersonal skills:

“Customer service can be a good choice after the completion of my bachelor's degree. I like to interact with people, solve problems, and help customers. I think psychology has given me some understanding of behavior, which can be useful.”

Participant C expressed an aspiration to enter human resources:

“My future career plan is to become an HR or recruiter. I like the idea of working with people, and helping a company find the right talent. HR seems like a good fit with what I've studied.”

These responses illustrate that undergraduate students, even within the same academic discipline, interpret their career trajectories differently. Their choices reflected a combination of educational background, perceived competencies, and personal interests rather than a narrow adherence to their degree field.

Methods of career exploration

Participants described using multiple strategies to explore potential career options. Online platforms were the most frequently cited, particularly JobStreet, LinkedIn, and social media channels. These resources were valued for their accessibility and coverage of opportunities. Participant B stated:

“Looking into social media, like Facebook, LinkedIn, and more. I usually search for job posts, join career-related groups, and sometimes connect with alumni who share their experiences. It is fast and easy to get information.”

However, participants were not exclusively reliant on digital tools. Two participants emphasized interpersonal networks, including friends, peers, and online communities. Participant A stated:

“Normally, I would discuss with my friends first. They are also looking for jobs, so we share experiences. Sometimes I ask seniors who already work in the field. Their advice feels more real compared to just reading job descriptions online.”

Interestingly, only Participant C attended career fairs to explore opportunities and highlight the value of direct interactions with employers:

“I will go to career fairs to find more opportunities as many companies participated. I can talk to HR representatives and clarify doubts. It feels more reliable than what’s written online because sometimes the information can be fake.”

Factors influencing career exploration

The responses revealed three major influences: advice and feedback from others, job stability and the organization’s reputation, and personal interest. Advice from parents and peers carried strong weight, particularly in the Malaysian cultural context. Participant C stated:

“So I will listen to their advice and it affects my career exploration, especially from my parents. Then I will choose the field they suggested. If they think it is good, I feel more confident in that choice.”

Participant B echoed this, emphasizing the importance of peer networks:

“They are experienced. I will ask for their advice and guidance whenever I need to make a decision. Sometimes my friends can be more realistic, like they tell me which company is better to join.”

Another factor was the perceived stability of a job and the reputation of the organization. Participant A stated this, emphasizing pragmatic considerations:

“Stability can be a factor. Just like the stability of the job, like a bank. I do not want to keep changing jobs. I need to make sure I am financially stable. This is the main factor affecting my decision.”

Personal interest was mentioned but appeared to play a secondary role. Participant B expressed a desire for a balance:

“To choose the one the other suggested and match with my interests. It is not just about what I want but also what others think is practical.”

Challenges in career exploration

Despite their efforts, participants faced significant challenges in career exploration. Firstly, they reported insufficient or unreliable information. Participant A commented:

“The information is limited and usually incomplete. Sometimes companies don’t put enough details, and when I apply, I realize the job is different from what they described.”

Second, negative feedback from family or peers sometimes undermines their confidence in career exploration and decision-making. Participant B stated:

“They provide negative comments and feedback for each job that I am interested in or looking for. Sometimes it makes me doubt my own decision, like maybe I am making the wrong choice.”

Finally, participants pointed out the mismatches between job requirements and competencies. Participant C stated:

“Some jobs like customer service listed academic performance as one of the selection criteria, such as a CGPA of at least 3.5 and above. This makes it difficult for me because my grades are average.”

Across the four focus areas, the findings reveal that undergraduate career exploration is a multidimensional and socially influenced process. All three participants demonstrated clear future career aspirations, though these were not limited to their academic discipline, suggesting flexibility and openness to diverse industries. While digital platforms such as JobStreet and LinkedIn served as the primary tools for exploration, students also relied heavily on social networks and interpersonal guidance, highlighting the importance of relational trust in validating career information. The study also showed that external influences like parental advice, peer recommendations, and perceptions of job stability often outweighed personal interests. While students expressed some individual preferences, these were negotiated against family expectations and pragmatic concerns about financial security. In addition, students encountered significant challenges, including incomplete or inaccurate career-related information, negative feedback from their social environment, and a mismatch between

their competencies and employers' requirements. These challenges sometimes created uncertainty, reduced confidence, and limited the scope of career opportunities perceived as attainable. In summary, the findings suggest that career exploration among Malaysian final-year undergraduates is shaped by an interplay of individual aspirations, social-cultural influences, and structural barriers. Students are proactive in exploring opportunities through various digital platforms, but their decision-making is constrained by the availability of resources, expectations from others, and gaps in skills. It highlights the complexity of the career decision-making process.

Using a qualitative approach, the current study explored how undergraduate students navigate their career paths and the challenges they encounter. The findings focused on four main areas: future career plans, career exploration activities, factors influencing career exploration, and challenges faced by students.

Future career plans and exploration

Firstly, all participants identified specific career fields of interest, reflecting the crystallization process of career aspirations typically observed among final-year undergraduate students (Fletcher et al., 2019). This aligns with developmental theories of career choice, such as Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, which suggests that late adolescence and early adulthood represent a stage where individuals begin to refine and commit to occupational preferences. Career exploration emerged as a key mechanism for this refinement, consistent with past studies showing that exploration enhances self-knowledge, awareness of opportunities, and informed decision-making (Jiang et al., 2019). Engaging in career exploration helps students identify and pursue careers that align with their interests and competencies.

Information sources and career exploration

Consistent with previous findings, undergraduate students demonstrated a preference for online sources, particularly social media and career-related websites, for gathering information about job opportunities (Fetherston, 2019). These platforms provide students with various details, such as job scopes, selection criteria, and salary ranges. However, the quality, completeness and accuracy of this information varied considerably, shaping the accuracy of students' perceptions of career options. As a result, many students reported the need to consult multiple sources, highlighting the importance of digital literacy in career development. Beyond simply accessing information, students must be able to critically evaluate and synthesize the information to make informed career decisions.

Personal and environmental influences

The findings revealed that career exploration is influenced by a complex interaction between personal and contextual factors. Parental involvement emerged as a strong influence, particularly in collectivistic contexts such as Malaysia, where family input is often valued and perceived as supportive (Zahar et al., 2023; Ramadhani and Suharso, 2020). Parental guidance may enhance students' career decision-making self-efficacy, which in turn motivates active engagement in exploration (Makki et al., 2023; Pordelan et al., 2020). At the same time, students emphasized the importance of aligning decisions with personal interests, reflecting an individualistic orientation consistent with global trends among younger generations (Sharma, 2022). The interplay of collectivistic

values (e.g., parental guidance) and individualistic aspirations (e.g., personal interests) highlights the tension many students may encounter when making career choices. Additionally, other environmental factors such as job stability and organizational reputation were salient in students' decision-making. These elements act as career anchors, shaping career preferences and fostering long-term positive employment outcomes, such as job satisfaction and commitment (Lambert et al., 2020). The emphasis on stability and reputation reflects students' concern with future career development and their desire to minimize uncertainty in the labor market.

Challenges in career exploration

The study also identified multiple challenges that hinder students' career exploration. One recurrent theme was the mismatch between students' competencies and labor market requirements. Employers in Malaysia have long emphasized gaps in English language proficiency and employability skills, including communication, problem-solving, and analytical abilities (Nadarajah, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2014). These deficiencies often result in graduates being overlooked during recruitment, reinforcing the graduate unemployment problem and its wider economic implications. It also suggests that, while higher education institutions (HEIs) aim to equip students with technical and disciplinary knowledge, the demand from employers extends beyond academic performance to include soft skills. Without bridging this gap, graduates may continue to experience barriers in entering the labor market. This phenomenon affects both individual career trajectories and undermines the national agenda of producing a skilled and competitive workforce. Although the Internet simplifies the process of information gathering, the completeness and accuracy of the information can significantly impact students' career exploration. Students may rely on online sources when considering career options, but fragmented or unreliable information can mislead them, resulting in poor decision-making. For instance, limited knowledge about industry trends, job roles, and career progression pathways may cause students to choose majors or career tracks that are misaligned with their long-term goals or market needs. Insufficient information about the job market has been shown to hinder both career exploration and the selection of majors among students (Han, 2020). Fortunately, this perceived barrier can be mitigated by the support and guidance of others, which enhances an individual's career adaptability (Pang et al., 2021). Notably, the completeness and accuracy of information are crucial for providing students with a sense of security, enabling them to make well-informed decisions and reducing the likelihood of career indecision.

Since individuals value the advice and guidance of others, their career exploration and decision-making are also likely to be influenced by others' comments, particularly negative ones. Receiving negative feedback about their decisions can significantly impact motivation and increase confusion, particularly during transitional periods such as undergraduate studies (Kleine et al., 2021). The social context thus plays an essential role in shaping students' confidence and persistence in career exploration. However, various factors can influence how they respond to such comments, including a fear of negative evaluation. Individuals with a greater fear of negative evaluation are more likely to perceive negative comments more harshly, which may result in avoidance behavior or reluctance to pursue certain career paths (Saxon and Calogero, 2020). This highlights the interaction relationship between personal factors and environmental influences, suggesting that career interventions should not be restricted to providing

accurate labor market information, but also equip students with adequate coping strategies to handle negative feedback. Overall, this study expands our understanding of career exploration among Malaysian undergraduate students, particularly the factors influencing their career exploration and the challenges they encounter. It highlights the importance of information and guidance from others, which can either facilitate or hinder students' career exploration and decision-making. Incorporating these elements into career-related strategies could enhance their effectiveness in addressing graduate unemployment issues. Furthermore, the mismatch between job requirements and students' competencies warrants further exploration. HEIs could consider reviewing their curricula and aligning them with job market demands. This initiative could help close the gap between job market demands and graduates' competencies, streamline the hiring process, and enhance graduates' employability. For example, embedding employability modules, increasing industry-academic collaborations, and providing experiential learning opportunities such as internships may be valuable steps in preparing students for the realities of the workforce.

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations could affect the interpretation of the findings and their generalizability. Firstly, the relatively small sample limits the ability to capture variability in the findings. Future researchers should expand the study by recruiting more participants to better reflect the diverse conditions in Malaysia, including rural and urban contexts, as well as students from public and private institutions. Secondly, participants appeared to struggle with comprehending the interview questions. Many requested that questions be repeated, and the interviewer had to simplify them. Future researchers should consider translating the interview questions into different languages to allow participants to respond more comfortably during the interview sessions. Additionally, further studies could incorporate mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges in career exploration. Longitudinal research would also be beneficial to capture how students' perceptions and career aspirations change over time.

Conclusion

Graduate unemployment continues to be a pressing issue in Malaysia, with significant social and economic implications. This study explored how final-year undergraduate students engage in career exploration and the challenges they face in navigating the transition from university to the labor market. Key findings revealed that while students rely heavily on online platforms and social networks as primary sources of career information, their decisions are also influenced by personal interests, family expectations, job stability, and the perceived reputation of organizations. These findings highlight the complex interplay between individual aspirations and external pressures in shaping students' career trajectories. However, challenges such as limited access to accurate and comprehensive information, the persistent mismatch between students' competencies and labor market demands, and the impact of negative feedback often hinder effective exploration. These barriers reduce students' confidence and increase the risk of poor career choices, which in turn perpetuate the graduate unemployment problem. Addressing these issues requires more than individual effort; it calls for systemic changes within higher education institutions and stronger collaboration with industry stakeholders. Importantly, HEIs must not only provide technical knowledge but

also actively cultivate employability skills, adaptability, and resilience through curriculum reforms, career counseling, and experiential learning opportunities.

The findings suggest the need for more supportive, culturally relevant career strategies that recognize the role of family influence and social expectations in students' decision-making. At the same time, closer alignment between higher education curricula and industry demands is crucial to ensure graduates are adequately prepared for the realities of the labor market. By bridging this gap, Malaysia can work toward producing a workforce that is not only academically qualified but also equipped with the practical competencies required by employers. Although this study was limited by its small and relatively homogenous sample, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into the Malaysian context. Future research should expand to include a more diverse demographic across regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, types of institutions, as well as adopt multilingual approaches to ensure inclusivity and comfort during data collection. Additionally, longitudinal studies could further illuminate how career exploration patterns evolve over time and how early interventions may improve career-related outcomes. In conclusion, supporting students in developing self-awareness, resilience, and access to accurate career information is crucial for addressing graduate unemployment and preparing them for a competitive job market. By combining individual-focused interventions with systemic reforms in higher education and industry collaboration, Malaysia can better equip its graduates to thrive in an increasingly dynamic and uncertain employment landscape.

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Conflict of interest

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