

# Aligning Sabah Foundation Education Scholarship with Employability: Strategies for Bridging the Gap

Nesin Elizabeth Kinat, Nelson Lajuni, Dinisiah Liasan, and Zulaikha Hj. Abdul Kassim

**Abstract** - This paper explores the intersection of education scholarship and employability, aiming to elucidate the role of Sabah Foundation education scholarship in narrowing the gap between educational outcomes and workforce readiness. It examines the challenges and opportunities in fostering alignment between education and employability, emphasising the importance of equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and competencies demanded by the evolving labour market. This paper elucidates effective strategies for integrating employability-focused initiatives into educational systems by synthesising research, case studies, and best practices. By promoting collaboration among educators, employers, policymakers, and other stakeholders, education scholarship can catalyse enhancing employability outcomes and facilitate successful transitions from education to the workforce.

**Keywords:** Education Scholarship; Employability; Workforce Readiness; Skills Development, Curriculum Design, Career Guidance, Collaboration.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The chasm between education and employability persists as a pressing concern globally, with graduates often ill-prepared for the demands of the job market. According to a recent report by the World Economic Forum (WEF), while educational institutions focus on imparting theoretical knowledge, employers seek practical skills and adaptability in their workforce, resulting in a significant disparity between what is taught and what is required in the workplace (WEF, 2023). This disconnect underscores the critical need to integrate employability skills into educational curricula. Studies have shown that addressing employability within education enhances graduates' job prospects and contributes to economic growth and social stability (García-Peñalvo et al., 2021). Education scholarship emerges as a potent mechanism for bridging this gap, offering a platform for research, innovation, and collaboration between academia and industry. By fostering partnerships and designing curriculum reforms informed by empirical evidence, education scholarship facilitates the development of relevant skills and competencies that align with evolving workplace demands, ultimately enhancing graduates' employability and bridging the gap between education and the workforce. Challenges in Bridging Education and Employability.

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## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the recognized importance of aligning education with workforce demands to enhance employability outcomes, significant challenges persist in bridging the gap between educational attainment and the skills required by the evolving labor market. While initiatives such as the Sabah Foundation education scholarship exist to address this disparity, a comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness and the strategies necessary for successful integration into educational systems remains lacking. This knowledge gap impedes progress in fostering a seamless transition for learners from education to the workforce, ultimately hindering efforts to maximize their potential contribution to economic growth and societal development. Therefore, there is a need to investigate and address the obstacles hindering the effective implementation of employability-focused initiatives within educational frameworks, with a focus on synthesizing research, identifying best practices, and promoting collaboration among key stakeholders to enhance overall outcomes.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition and dimensions of employability

Employability has emerged as a central topic in workforce development and achieving career success. Defined as the ability of individuals to secure and retain employment, employability encompasses a diverse range of skills, attributes, and qualities vital for thriving in today's ever-evolving job market (Smith & Johnson, 2023).

Employability is a multifaceted construct critical for navigating success within the contemporary job market, spanning across diverse dimensions (Brown et al., 2022). Firstly, it is imperative to possess pertinent skills and knowledge, encompassing technical proficiencies and industry-specific expertise, which are indispensable (Jones & Smith, 2023). Moreover, personal attributes like motivation, adaptability, and resilience play a crucial role in achieving success in the workplace (Brown et al., 2022).

Employability enhancement through educational scholarships can be achieved through multifaceted approaches. Central to this endeavour is the strategic design of curricula to integrate essential employability skills seamlessly into academic programs, ensuring graduates are equipped with competencies sought by employers (European Commission, 2021). Complementary to this, incorporating experiential learning initiatives offers students invaluable opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical

settings, fostering the development of critical skills essential for success in real-world scenarios (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Furthermore, providing comprehensive career guidance and counselling services is pivotal in helping learners make informed decisions about their future trajectories, leveraging their talents and interests to align with suitable career pathways (Kumar & McLean, 2022). Additionally, forging strong partnerships with industries is paramount, enabling educational programs to stay abreast of evolving workforce demands and providing students firsthand insights into industry practices and expectations (Clarke et al., 2021). By implementing these strategies, educational scholarships can empower individuals with the requisite skills and knowledge to thrive in today's competitive job market.

Empowering learners for lifelong employability necessitate a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the evolving nature of the workforce and the demands it places on individuals. Firstly, cultivating a culture of lifelong learning and skill development is paramount. Encouraging continuous education and upskilling ensures individuals remain relevant in their fields and equips them with the agility needed to navigate a rapidly changing job market (Koenen et al., 2021). Secondly, fostering adaptability, resilience, and an entrepreneurial mindset among learners is essential. Providing opportunities for learners to embrace uncertainty, learn from failure, and innovate prepares them to thrive in dynamic work environments characterised by technological disruptions and global challenges (Ferreira & Almeida, 2023). Lastly, recognising diverse pathways to success and valuing non-traditional forms of learning is crucial. Embracing alternative routes such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and online certifications acknowledges the multifaceted nature of talent and ensures inclusivity and accessibility in the pursuit of employability (Hansen & Flanagan, 2022). By prioritising these principles, educational institutions can empower learners to embark on fulfilling and sustainable career journeys in an ever-evolving employment landscape.

Case studies and examples provide invaluable insights into exemplary programs and initiatives that effectively integrate education and employability and inspire success stories of individuals or institutions successfully bridging the gap between education and employment. Examining exemplary programs and initiatives unveils innovative approaches to aligning educational curricula with workforce demands. For instance, the "SkillsFuture" initiative in Singapore offers a comprehensive ecosystem of lifelong learning and skills development, enabling individuals to acquire relevant competencies for diverse career pathways (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2022). Similarly, the "TechHire" program in the United States connects employers with non-traditional job seekers through tailored training programs, addressing skills shortages in the tech industry while promoting diversity and inclusion (US Department of Labor, 2021). Secondly, success stories of individuals or institutions navigating the education-employment divide offer valuable lessons and inspiration. One such example is the story of Sarah Jones, who transitioned from a

liberal arts background to a successful career in technology by leveraging online learning platforms and participating in coding boot camps, showcasing the transformative power of continuous upskilling and reskilling (Friedman, 2023). Moreover, institutions like the European Training Foundation have documented success stories of vocational education and training programs empowering marginalised youth in Kosovo to secure meaningful employment and contribute to socio-economic development, highlighting the transformative potential of targeted interventions (European Training Foundation, 2022). By analysing these case studies and examples, stakeholders can glean actionable strategies and insights to inform policy decisions, program design, and individual career pathways, ultimately fostering a more seamless transition from education to employment.

Policy implications and institutional support are crucial in bridging the gap between education and industry, ensuring graduates are equipped with the skills demanded by the job market. Firstly, policymakers should prioritise fostering collaboration between the education and industry sectors through targeted policy recommendations. This can involve establishing industry advisory boards to guide curriculum development, promoting joint research initiatives, and incentivising partnerships through tax credits or grants (Khatib & Johnson, 2022). Secondly, funding opportunities and incentives are essential for institutions prioritising employability outcomes. Governments can allocate resources specifically earmarked for initiatives such as career services, internships, and experiential learning programs that enhance students' workforce readiness (OECD, 2021).

Moreover, accreditation bodies and quality assurance mechanisms promote employability-focused education by ensuring program quality and relevance. These bodies can integrate employability metrics into accreditation criteria, regularly evaluate curriculum alignment with industry needs, and encourage continuous improvement through feedback mechanisms (HEQC, 2020; QAA, 2023). By implementing these policy recommendations and providing robust institutional support, stakeholders can effectively address the skills gap and enhance graduates' employability in a rapidly evolving job market.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION (OR LIMITATION OR SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES)**

In conclusion, education scholarship is pivotal in bridging the gap between education and employability by fostering innovation, collaboration, and responsiveness to evolving workforce demands. Through rigorous research, curriculum development, and pedagogical innovation, education scholars play a crucial role in equipping learners with the skills, competencies, and mindset required for success in the 21st-century workforce (García-Peñalvo et al., 2021). However, realising the full potential of education in enhancing employability requires concerted action from stakeholders across sectors. Therefore, there is a pressing call to action for policymakers, educators, employers, and community leaders to prioritise employability outcomes and invest in

collaborative efforts that promote experiential learning, industry partnerships, and lifelong skill development (OECD, 2021; Khatib & Johnson, 2022). By harnessing diverse stakeholders' collective expertise and resources, we can effectively address the challenges and seize the opportunities to align education with employability, ensuring that learners are adequately prepared for the demands of the modern workforce. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions and initiatives to enhance education's relevance and effectiveness in preparing learners for successful and fulfilling careers in the dynamic landscape of the 21st Century.

Future directions and emerging trends in the intersection of education and employability highlight opportunities for innovation, the impact of emerging technologies, and anticipated challenges for research and practice. Firstly, exploring opportunities for innovation in education scholarship is essential to enhance employability. This involves leveraging interdisciplinary research to develop novel approaches for integrating employability skills into curricula, fostering entrepreneurship, and promoting lifelong learning (García-Peñalvo et al., 2021). Secondly, emerging technologies and pedagogical approaches are shaping the future of education and work. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and gamification offer new avenues for personalised learning experiences, skills development, and remote collaboration, revolutionising traditional educational paradigms (Ala-Mutka et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). Moreover, anticipatory challenges and considerations for future research and practice include addressing digital divide issues, ensuring equitable access to technology and education, and navigating the ethical implications of automation and AI in the workforce (Pillay et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021). By proactively engaging with these future directions and trends, stakeholders can drive meaningful change, foster innovation, and address the evolving needs of the education and employment landscape.

#### Key skills and competencies required for success in the modern workforce.

Success in the contemporary workforce relies on a fusion of essential skills and competencies that empower individuals to adeptly navigate dynamic work environments with agility and efficacy. Foundational to this success are digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving capabilities, enabling professionals to harness technology and address intricate challenges (Nguyen et al., 2023). Strong communication skills are indispensable for fostering collaboration and engaging stakeholders, while adaptability and flexibility are essential for individuals to excel in rapidly changing environments (Smith et al., 2023). Creativity and innovation propel advancement and competitive edge, while effective teamwork and emotional intelligence cultivate constructive relationships and resilient teams (Brown et al., 2023). Leadership skills, cultural competence, and resilience are essential for effectively leading teams, navigating diverse environments, and

surmounting challenges (Nguyen & Smith, 2023). Furthermore, effective time management, organizational skills, and a dedication to lifelong learning are imperative for fostering continual growth and adapting to evolving demands (Garcia et al., 2023). By cultivating these multifaceted skills and competencies, individuals position themselves for success in the dynamic landscape of the modern workforce.

#### Trends shaping the future of work and implications for education.

The future of work is evolving under the influence of various significant trends, carrying substantial implications for education and workforce development. Automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are revolutionizing industries, prompting a reconfiguration of the skills and competencies demanded in the workforce (Chung et al., 2023).

The rise of the gig economy and remote work is changing traditional employment structures, necessitating a greater emphasis on flexibility and entrepreneurship (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). Moreover, demographic shifts, such as an aging population and increasing diversity, are driving the need for greater cultural competence and inclusivity in the workplace (Deloitte, 2020). These trends underscore the importance of education systems adapting to equip individuals with the skills needed to thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape. There is a growing demand for interdisciplinary education, emphasizing not only technical skills but also critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, and adaptability (World Economic Forum, 2020). Lifelong learning and continuous upskilling are becoming imperative to remain competitive in the job market, highlighting the need for educational institutions to offer flexible, accessible learning opportunities (European Commission, 2017). Collaborations between academia, industry, and government are essential to ensure that education systems remain responsive to the evolving needs of the workforce and society at large (OECD, 2019). By addressing these trends and adapting educational approaches accordingly, institutions can better prepare individuals for the challenges and opportunities of the future of work.

Employability is a multifaceted construct that encompasses a diverse array of skills, attributes, and competencies. From technical proficiencies to personal qualities and career management skills, the dimensions of employability are interconnected and dynamic. By understanding and cultivating these dimensions, individuals can enhance their readiness for the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary job market.

## V. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative method, using a questionnaire based on the Graduate Tracking System questionnaire created by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education in 2009. The questionnaire was distributed online and through postal services for data collection from May 2, 2023, to August 31, 2023. The

research group comprises persons who were beneficiaries of the ABCNS programme and finished their education from 1990 to 2022. At first, the population consisted of 325 BCNS-sponsored grads, with 40 persons excluded because of missing crucial contact information such as home addresses and emails. The sampling frame was developed using 285 graduates. The sample size of 164 respondents was determined using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator. We acquired data and a list of ABCNS beneficiaries from the Education Development Division of the Sabah Foundation.

## VI. FINDINGS

A total of 167 recipients of ABCNS voluntarily participated in this study, providing a comprehensive overview of their demographics and career-related aspects as illustrated in Table 1,2, and 3. Gender distribution revealed that 36.5% identified as male, while 63.5% identified as female. The sample exhibited diverse educational backgrounds, with 56.9% completing studies within Malaysia and 43.1% pursuing education abroad. Marital status varied, with 76.0% identifying as single and 24.0% as married. Age distribution showed a majority in the 25-30 age range (65.3%). Ethnic diversity was observed, including Malay (6.0%), Chinese (31.7%), KDM (29.3%), Bajau (7.2%), and others (25.7%)

TABLE 1: JOB FIELD AND ETHNICITY

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	61	36.5
Female	106	63.5
Total	167	100.0
Place of Study	Frequency	Percent
In Malaysia	95	56.9
Outside Malaysia	72	43.1
Total	167	100.0
Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Single	127	76.0
Married	40	24.0
Total	167	100.0
Age	Frequency	Percent
18-24	1	.6
25-30	109	65.3
31-34	28	16.8
35-40	17	10.2
40-45	2	1.2
41-45	5	3.0
46-50	4	2.4
> 50	1	.6
Total	167	100.0
Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Melayu	10	6.0
Cina	53	31.7
KDM	49	29.3
Bajau	12	7.2
Lain-lain	43	25.7
Total	167	100.0
Working Status	Frequency	Percent
Full-Time	150	89.8
Unemployed	13	7.8
Part-time	4	2.4
Total	167	100.0
Sector	Frequency	Percent
Government	84	50.3
Private (Inc. NGO)	65	38.9
Unemployed	13	7.8

Self-employed	3	1.8
Employer	2	1.2
Total	167	100.0
Income	Frequency	Percent
No Income	13	7.8
< RM1000	2	1.2
RM1501 - RM2000	3	1.8
RM2001 - RM2500	3	1.8
RM2501 - RM3000	3	1.8
RM3001 - RM4000	11	6.6
RM4001 - RM5000	38	22.8
RM5001 - RM10000	62	37.1
Total	167	100.0

TABLE 2: JOB FIELD MATCHING

Matching Degree-Job	Frequency	Percent
Yes	133	79.6
No	34	20.4
Total	167	100.0

TABLE 3: EMPLOYABILITY

Study	Work			Total	% Employability
	Full-Time	Unemployed	Part-Time		
In Malaysia	87	7	1	95	92.63%
Outside Malaysia	63	6	3	72	95.83%
Total	150	13	4	167	92.21%

## VII. DISCUSSION

Employability enhancement through educational scholarships can be achieved through multifaceted approaches. Central to this endeavour is the strategic design of curricula to integrate essential employability skills seamlessly into academic programs, ensuring graduates are equipped with competencies sought by employers (European Commission, 2021). Complementary to this, incorporating experiential learning initiatives offers students invaluable opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, fostering the development of critical skills essential for success in real-world scenarios (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Furthermore, providing comprehensive career guidance and counselling services is pivotal in helping learners make informed decisions about their future trajectories, leveraging their talents and interests to align with suitable career pathways (Kumar & McLean, 2022). Additionally, forging strong partnerships with industries is paramount, enabling educational programs to stay abreast of evolving workforce demands and providing students first-hand insights into industry practices and expectations (Clarke et al., 2021). By implementing these strategies, educational scholarships can empower individuals with the requisite skills and knowledge to thrive in today's competitive job market.

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