

Employability Outcomes of TVET Graduates in Malaysia's Hospitality and Tourism Industry: Stakeholders' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry highlights the urgent need for a skilled and employable workforce. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions play a key role in producing graduates with the competencies required by industry, yet concerns remain regarding their employability. This conceptual paper examines employability outcomes of TVET graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism sector by synthesizing stakeholder perspectives and drawing on human capital and stakeholder theory. A conceptual framework is proposed, integrating insights from educators and policymakers to address factors such as curriculum relevance, soft skill development, work-based learning, industry collaboration, and policy alignment. Findings suggest that employability encompasses not only technical competence but also critical attributes like communication, adaptability, and professionalism. The framework emphasizes dynamic industry-academia partnerships and stakeholder engagement as essential to bridging skills gaps. This study contributes to discourse on workforce development and positions TVET as a driver of sustainable employment and economic resilience.

Keywords: Graduates Employability, Hospitality and Tourism, Stakeholder Perspectives, Technical and Vocational Educational Training, Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the sought after industry in the global market, hospitality and tourism sector are constantly changing and highly competitive (Kariru, 2023). According to UN Tourism (2024), the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products, or automobiles, and it has become one of the major players in international commerce and represents one of the main income sources for many developing countries (UNWTO, 2024). This is not surprising as the industry has experienced continued growth and diversification throughout the decades, from construction to agriculture, or telecommunications, and these dynamics have turned the industry into a key driver for socio-economic progress (UNWTO, 2024; Wondirad, Kebete & Li, 2021; Weidenfeld, 2018; Telfer & Sharpley, 2015).

To fulfill the rapid changes and high demands of the industry, it is essential for the industry players to produce graduates that is highly skillful and competent to fulfill the vision of hospitality and tourism industry. Eventually, the expansion of this sector has led to a growing demand for skilled professionals equipped with relevant knowledge and expertise. By looking at this situation, the

integration of hospitality and tourism education into technical and vocational and training (TVET) is crucial and can be look as a strategic approach to meet the industry's need. As asserted by Alam (2020), the integration not only will equip students with the necessary practical skills and theoretical knowledge required to excel in hospitality and tourism sector, but at the same time address broader issue related to employability and sustainability. Moreover, by embedding sustainability principles and job-relevant skills into the education system, the future workforce is well prepared to counter any challenges and opportunities of the evolving global landscapes.

As known, the hospitality and tourism sectors are characterized by their dynamic nature, rapid technological advancements, and increasing focus on sustainability. To date, there is a growing need for professionals who can adapt to these changes and contribute effectively to the industry's growth. By incorporating industry-relevant skills and sustainable practices into TVET curricula, educational institutions can produce graduates who are well-prepared to meet the current and future needs of the job market (Karunarathne et al., 2021). This alignment between education and industry not only benefits students by enhancing their job prospects but also contributes to the overall development of the hospitality and tourism sectors in Malaysia.

The integration of hospitality and tourism education into Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) presents a critical strategy for addressing the persistent issue of graduate employability in Malaysia. The hospitality and tourism sector contributes significantly to the Malaysian economy and demands a workforce that combines technical competence with interpersonal, digital, and cultural skills (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024). TVET's inherent emphasis on experiential learning and industry-aligned training makes it an ideal channel for cultivating those multidimensional competencies (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024; Cassim & Elson-Rogers, 2023). However, studies reveal notable gaps in curriculum relevance, soft skill development, and digital readiness among TVET graduates, weaknesses that diminish their labor market value (Cassim & Elson-Rogers, 2023; Penang Institute, 2024). Despite high overall employability rates reported by polytechnics and community colleges, reaching over 90% within six months, institutions under the Ministry of Tourism and other ministries fall short, with rates sometimes dipping to 55–65% (Penang Institute, 2024). Integrating sector-specific hospitality and tourism competencies with strong employer engagement and quality assurance mechanisms can narrow the skills gap and enhance graduate readiness (Penang Institute, 2024; ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025). Thus, embedding hospitality and tourism specialization into TVET programs is both timely and essential for aligning workforce output with industry expectations, fostering sustainable employability, and supporting Malaysia's broader economic resilience.

Despite substantial investment in TVET development, concerns about the employability of its graduates persist. Employers often report skill mismatches, inadequate soft skills, and a lack of industry readiness among graduates entering the workforce. This conceptual paper aims to explore the employability outcomes of TVET graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism sector from a stakeholder perspective. It proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the views of two key stakeholders educators and policymakers—by drawing upon relevant theories and models. The paper emphasizes the need for a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach in addressing the employability gap in TVET and offers policy and practice recommendations for enhancing graduate outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is divided into four sections. The first part will discuss on the multi-dimensional constructs

which built the foundation of employability which is considered crucial in the hospitality and tourism industry. Next, the literature explains the shifts of paradigms of hospitality education in Malaysia, followed by the role of employability in nurturing the hospitality and tourism industry. Moreover, the research gaps in current educational programs and the suggested conceptual framework for each variable in this study are critically discussed. Further, the methodology used for the study are thoroughly elucidate, followed by the section on the conclusion which suggest the directions for future research.

Employability: A Multi-Dimensional Constructs

Nowadays, employability in hospitality and tourism is no longer viewed as the mere possession of technical skills, instead, it encompasses of different categories which needed to be fulfil by the graduates to cater the job demand. Additionally, the discourse on employability outcomes has gained increasing prominence in educational policy and scholarly research, particularly in contexts where higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are positioned as key drivers of economic growth. Employability outcomes are broadly understood as the combination of knowledge, skills, and attributes that enable graduates to secure employment, sustain career development, and contribute productively to organizations and society (Harvey, 2001; Yorke, 2006). These outcomes are no longer limited to technical competencies but now encompass soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, and digital literacy (Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Kenayathulla et al., 2019). In Malaysia, employability has become a critical policy agenda, reflecting the country's aspiration to produce a workforce that is globally competitive, resilient, and future-ready (MOHE, 2015).

Employability has different terms and definitions according to different countries. According to Yorke (2006, p. 8), employability can be defined as “a set of achievements-skills, understanding and personal attributes-that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their occupation, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy”. From the employers' perspective, graduate employability is a function of the skills, attitudes and personality of graduates that determine whether they are sufficiently “attractive” to be employed (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2020). In Malaysia, the term employability can be categorised into three main groups as asserted by Moo and Da Wan (2023). Firstly, it focuses on the capabilities and intrinsic characteristics of individuals, such as skills, understandings, and personal attributes; it is seen as the absolute dimension of employability (Cheng et al., 2021). The second group on the other hand arguing that employability is primarily influenced by the labor market and external factors, such as social, institutional, and economic factors (Sin & Amaral, 2017). As for the third group, it emphasizes on the 'duality of employability' which acknowledges the need to understand both absolute and relative dimensions of employability (Williams et al., 2019). As contended by Moo and Da Wan (2023), skills and competencies are essential and must be acquired by the graduates for to ensure their employability success. This is in line with the notion by Delva et al. (2021) who stressed on the importance of individuals' personal characteristics and skills, as well as the influences of external factors on employability opportunities within a social context.

Within this context, TVET is recognized as a pivotal mechanism for producing a skilled workforce tailored to industry needs. Defined by UNESCO (2015) as education and training processes that equip individuals with practical skills, technical knowledge, and professional attitudes, TVET in Malaysia plays a central role in national development. TVET institutions, ranging from polytechnics and vocational colleges to community colleges and specialized training centers are tasked with bridging

the gap between education and employment (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). National strategies, including the Eleventh Malaysia Plan and the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, underscore the centrality of TVET in achieving economic transformation, particularly by enhancing graduate employability and meeting labor market demands (MOHE, 2015).

The hospitality and tourism industry, in turn, forms one of the most significant sectors of Malaysia's economy, both as a contributor to GDP and as a generator of employment opportunities. Globally, the sector is defined as a collection of services encompassing lodging, food and beverage operations, travel, events, and recreational activities, all of which support leisure and business experiences (UNWTO, 2019). According to Shariff and Razak (2021), in Malaysia, the industry is labor-intensive and service-oriented, requiring graduates who possess not only technical skills in operations and service delivery but also cultural competence, interpersonal communication, creativity, and sustainability awareness. This demand places employability outcomes at the heart of hospitality and tourism education, highlighting the role of TVET as a pipeline for producing graduates capable of meeting dynamic industry needs.

Over the years, research related to employability outcomes of TVET graduates, particularly within the area of hospitality and tourism has become a major limelight among the stakeholders (Abulikelimu et al., 2024; Dzia-uddin et al., 2024; Beh & Wong, 2023; Shariff & Razak, 2022; Ismail, Chik & Hemdi, 2021). Malaysia's paradigm of employability outcomes within TVET has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, driven by the country's aspiration to become a high-income economy and regional hub for skilled labor. The government has consistently emphasized TVET as a strategic pathway to address labor market needs, reduce youth unemployment, and meet industry demands in sectors such as hospitality and tourism. Under the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016–2020), the government set ambitious goals to increase the proportion of skilled workers in the economy from 28% to 35% by 2020, with TVET graduates positioned as the main driver of this shift (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). The current Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025 further consolidates this vision by explicitly recognizing employability as a central outcome of tertiary education, highlighting the need for graduates who are not only technically proficient but also resilient, ethical, and adaptable to global changes (Ministry of Higher Education [MOHE], 2015).

Despite these strategic reforms, studies have consistently revealed gaps between policy aspirations and the actual employability outcomes of TVET graduates. Research shows that employers in Malaysia remain concerned about graduates' lack of communication skills, problem-solving abilities, self-confidence, and work discipline, even when their technical skills are adequate (Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Kenayathulla et al., 2019). This mismatch signals a paradigm in which employability outcomes can no longer be narrowly defined as technical mastery but must encompass a holistic blend of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies. Scholars such as Ravenscroft et al. (2022), Spencer and Lucas (2021), or Vasilev (2024) argue that TVET graduates require meta-skills learning how to learn, adaptability, and critical thinking, to remain relevant in dynamic industries like hospitality and tourism that are increasingly shaped by technology and global consumer trends.

The paradigm has also shifted toward greater industry involvement in shaping employability outcomes. The National TVET Empowerment Committee, formed in 2018, underscored the importance of integrating employers into curriculum development, industrial attachment programs, and assessment frameworks to ensure alignment between TVET training and workplace realities (MOHE, 2018). Competency-based education has become the dominant approach, with emphasis placed on outcome-based frameworks that articulate employability in terms of measurable skills, knowledge, and

workplace behaviors (Shariff & Razak, 2021). Importantly, employability is increasingly framed not only as an individual responsibility but also as a shared outcome shaped by institutional quality, employer engagement, and policy support.

Recent discourse on employability outcomes in Malaysia also reflects global shifts, particularly the integration of transversal skills, digital competencies, and entrepreneurial mindsets into TVET curricula. For the hospitality and tourism industry, this means preparing graduates who can navigate customer service excellence, technological innovations in booking and management systems, and sustainable practices demanded by international tourism standards. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the rethinking of employability outcomes, where resilience, adaptability, and digital literacy became indispensable attributes for survival in disrupted labor markets (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024). In sum, the Malaysian paradigm of employability outcomes in TVET has evolved from a narrow focus on technical qualifications to a multidimensional framework that integrates technical, soft, and digital skills, with a strong emphasis on stakeholder collaboration. Yet, the persistence of employer–graduate mismatches highlights a pressing need to re-evaluate how employability outcomes are conceptualized, assessed, and nurtured within TVET institutions. This evolving paradigm provides the backdrop for exploring employability outcomes specifically within the hospitality and tourism industry, where service excellence and global competitiveness depend heavily on graduates' holistic employability attributes.

Against this backdrop, the literature has increasingly examined the relationship between employability and educational reform in Malaysia. However, despite extensive national efforts and policy initiatives, gaps remain between graduate competencies and employer expectations as asserted by Kenayathulla et al. (2019). Moreover, limited research has explored how different stakeholders, employers, policymakers, educators, and industry practitioners, converge or diverge in their perspectives on employability outcomes. This literature review situates the discussion within three interrelated areas: the paradigm of employability outcomes in Malaysia's TVET, the shift in the paradigm of hospitality education, and the critical role of employability in nurturing the hospitality and tourism industry. By synthesizing these domains, this review not only identifies gaps in existing research but also establishes the conceptual foundation for examining employability outcomes from a multi-stakeholder perspective.

Shifts in Paradigm of Hospitality Education in Malaysia

Hospitality education in Malaysia has evolved in response to the rapid growth of the tourism and service economy, shifting from traditional vocational training toward competency-based and industry-driven education. Historically, hospitality programs emphasized technical proficiency in culinary arts, hotel operations, and service management. However, globalization, technological disruption, and the increasing expectations of international travelers have expanded the scope of skills required by graduates. This evolution has prompted a fundamental paradigm shift in hospitality education, moving away from narrowly defined occupational training toward a more holistic, outcome-based framework that prioritizes employability, innovation, and adaptability (Shariff & Razak, 2021).

One key shift has been the transition from knowledge and task-oriented curricula to competency-based models. Competency frameworks in Malaysia now encompass not only technical skills but also cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal competencies, such as problem-solving, leadership, cultural intelligence, and digital literacy. Studies using Delphi methods have identified competencies clustered into workplace, personal effectiveness, management, and academic domains, underscoring

the need for multidimensional skill development in hospitality graduates (Shariff & Razak, 2021). This reflects Malaysia's alignment with global standards in hospitality education, where employability is increasingly understood as a dynamic, lifelong capability rather than a fixed set of job-specific skills.

Another paradigm shift lies in the greater integration of industry stakeholders into curriculum design and delivery. Policy initiatives, such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025, emphasize collaboration between higher education institutions, TVET providers, and employers to ensure curricula remain relevant to industry demands (MOHE, 2015). Employers now play an active role in providing input on skill requirements, offering industrial training placements, and co-developing modules that reflect workplace realities. This has contributed to the introduction of experiential learning, problem-based projects, and structured internships as integral components of hospitality programs. However, despite these efforts, gaps persist especially in soft skills and leadership competencies, suggesting the need for deeper and more sustained collaboration (Kenayathulla et al., 2019).

The paradigm has also shifted to embrace digitalization and sustainability. The rise of e-tourism, online booking platforms, data-driven hospitality management, and digital customer engagement requires graduates to be digitally literate and adaptable to technological innovations. Simultaneously, global discourses on sustainable tourism have influenced Malaysian hospitality education, pushing institutions to incorporate sustainability, ethical tourism, and green hospitality practices into the curriculum. As suggested by Dzia-Uddin et al. (2024), this dual emphasis on digital and sustainable competencies reflects the industry's transformation and the demand for future-ready graduates capable of navigating complex socio-economic and environmental challenges. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic further catalyzed a shift in the paradigm by highlighting the importance of resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence in the hospitality workforce. Hospitality education providers have increasingly recognized that beyond technical mastery, graduates must cultivate flexibility, cross-cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal skills to thrive in a volatile, uncertain, and competitive global industry (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024). The pandemic also accelerated the adoption of blended and online learning modalities, signalling a permanent transformation in how hospitality education is delivered in Malaysia.

Role of Employability in Nurturing the Hospitality and Tourism Industry

The hospitality and tourism industry is inherently labour intensive and service driven, positioning human capital as the most critical determinant of service quality, customer satisfaction, and destination competitiveness. Employability, understood as the capacity of graduates to secure, sustain, and progress in employment through a blend of technical expertise, soft skills, and adaptive competencies, plays a pivotal role in shaping the industry's growth trajectory. The service encounters in hospitality whether in lodging, food and beverage, travel services, or event management are fundamentally mediated by employees' interpersonal competencies, problem-solving abilities, cultural sensitivity, and capacity for innovation. Thus, graduate employability outcomes directly influence the competitiveness and sustainability of the industry at both micro (organizational) and macro (national economic) levels (Yorke, 2006; Shariff & Razak, 2021).

From an organizational perspective, employable graduates contribute to operational efficiency and service innovation. Employers in the hospitality and tourism industry increasingly prioritize graduates who can adapt to technological integration, such as digital booking platforms, AI-driven customer engagement, and sustainable operational practices (Fieger et al., 2025). Beyond technical

competencies, employability outcomes such as teamwork, communication, leadership, and resilience determine how effectively employees can navigate service disruptions, resolve customer complaints, and contribute to continuous improvement (Kay & Russette, 2000). In a sector characterized by high turnover and dynamic market shifts, these competencies enhance organizational agility, reduce recruitment costs, and improve long-term service consistency.

At the industry level, employability contributes to destination competitiveness by elevating service quality standards and enhancing tourists' overall experience. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019) notes that service quality is a key differentiator in the global tourism market, and the employability of graduates is central to achieving and maintaining such quality. For emerging economies such as Malaysia, where tourism is a strategic economic pillar, employable graduates ensure that the workforce is capable of aligning with international service standards while integrating local cultural assets into unique value propositions. Comparative studies further emphasize that countries such as Singapore and Thailand embed employability outcomes within national skills frameworks and competency models to future proof their tourism workforce (Yoelao et al., 2024; SkillsFuture Singapore, n.d.), demonstrating that employability is not merely a labor market concern but a lever for national competitiveness.

In addition, employability nurtures the sustainability of the hospitality and tourism industry by fostering graduates who are conscious of ethical, environmental, and social responsibilities. With sustainability becoming a global priority, the industry increasingly requires employees who can integrate eco-friendly practices, promote responsible consumption, and communicate sustainability values to guests (Shariff & Razak, 2021). Employable graduates with such competencies not only meet consumer expectations but also contribute to the industry's long-term resilience. In this regard, employability is both an outcome of education and training systems and a driver of sustainable industry practices.

Despite these recognized roles, research indicates persistent gaps between the employability skills developed in higher education and TVET institutions and those demanded by hospitality employers (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Nugraha et al., 2020). Lazar (2025) for example contended that employers often report that graduates possess adequate technical knowledge but lack soft skills, career adaptability, and work-readiness, leading to underemployment or slower career progression. Addressing these gaps requires stronger collaboration between educators, policymakers, and industry practitioners to ensure curricula, assessment, and work-integrated learning experiences align with evolving industry needs. Therefore, nurturing employability in the hospitality and tourism industry is not only about producing job-ready graduates but also about cultivating a workforce that drives innovation, sustainability, and long-term industry competitiveness.

Research Gap and State of the Art

The current literature highlights that employability has increasingly been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing technical, transferable, digital, and dispositional competencies. Harvey (2001) and Shafie and Nayan (2010) emphasized that employability is not merely about acquiring jobs but about sustaining careers through adaptability, resilience, and continuous skill enhancement. Recent work in the Malaysian context further confirms that employers expect graduates to demonstrate communication, leadership, and problem-solving competencies in addition to technical proficiency (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Shariff & Razak, 2021). International studies from Singapore and Australia similarly recognize the integration of soft skills and work-integrated learning (WIL) as

essential to graduate employability (Ng et al., 2021; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020), while research from Thailand and Indonesia points to the growing importance of digital literacy and adaptability in hospitality education (Sirikul & Dorji, 2020; Sutanto, 2019). Collectively, these studies form the state of the art, which underscores a global shift toward competency-based education and industry-aligned TVET models.

Despite this progress, several research gaps persist. First, existing studies in Malaysia and comparable contexts often adopt a single-actor lens, examining either employers' expectations, graduates' competencies, or educators' perspectives, but seldom integrating all stakeholder viewpoints (Giotis, 2022; Shariff & Razak, 2021). This fragmentation makes it difficult to identify areas of convergence and divergence across employers, policymakers, and educators, thereby limiting the effectiveness of curriculum reform. Second, inconsistencies in defining and operationalizing employability outcomes hinder cross-study comparisons, as studies employ varied taxonomies and ad-hoc instruments (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2015). Third, while work integrated learning and internships are increasingly promoted as mechanisms for enhancing employability, little empirical evidence examines the quality of these experiences such as supervision, assessment, and alignment with learning outcomes and their measurable impact on graduate career trajectories (Ng et al., 2021; Sutanto, 2019).

Another significant gap lies in the lack of longitudinal research that tracks TVET graduates beyond their immediate employment outcomes. Most existing studies focus on short-term indicators such as job placement rates or employer satisfaction surveys, leaving unanswered questions about long-term career progression and industry retention (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Moreover, while hospitality and tourism comprise diverse sub-sectors such as culinary arts, events management, and hotel operations, many studies adopt a broad-brush approach that overlooks differences in competency requirements across occupational roles (Sirikul & Dorji, 2020). This lack of granularity restricts the ability of TVET institutions to design specialized curricula that meet sectoral needs.

Finally, emerging competencies related to digital literacy, sustainability, and career adaptability remain under-theorized and insufficiently embedded into competency frameworks within the hospitality and tourism industry. Post-COVID studies suggest that resilience, adaptability, and digital engagement are increasingly vital in hospitality service delivery (Giotis, 2022), yet these attributes are rarely translated into measurable learning outcomes or assessment tools within TVET systems. Consequently, while there is consensus on the importance of holistic employability outcomes, empirical and theoretical gaps persist in integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives, standardizing measures, ensuring the quality of WIL, and embedding emerging competencies into hospitality education. Addressing these gaps is critical not only for aligning TVET curricula with industry needs but also for enhancing the sustainability and competitiveness of Malaysia's hospitality and tourism sector in a globalized economy.

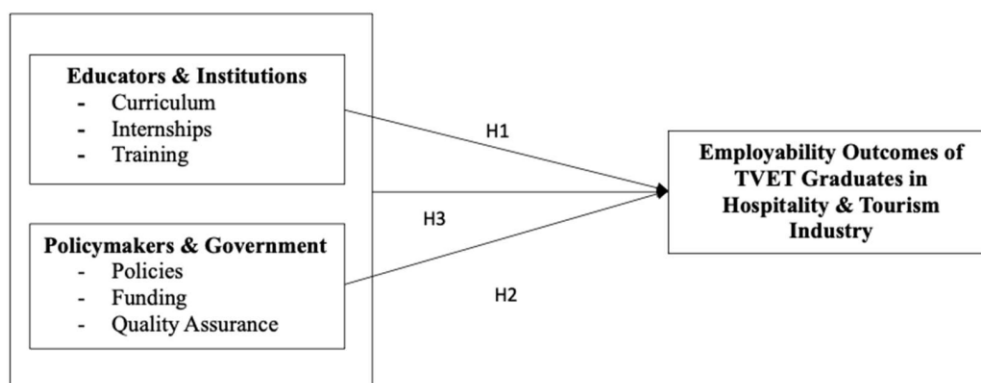
Table 1. Summary of Literature Review on Employability Outcomes of TVET Graduates in Malaysia's Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Theme	Focus	Key Findings	Identified Gaps
Definitions	Employability outcomes, TVET, hospitality &	Employability outcomes encompass technical and soft skills (Harvey, 2001; Shafie & Nayan, 2010). TVET is skills-	Lack of clarity across stakeholders on how employability outcomes are defined and operationalized in

	tourism	focused education (UNESCO, 2015). Hospitality industry demands service, managerial, and interpersonal skills (Shariff & Razak, 2021).	hospitality.
Paradigm of Employability Outcomes in Malaysia's TVET	National education policies and workforce strategies	Eleventh Malaysia Plan and Education Blueprint emphasize employability as central to graduate success (EPU, 2015; MOHE, 2015). Employers note deficits in communication, problem-solving, and leadership despite technical competency (Kenayathulla et al., 2019).	Persistent mismatch between graduate competencies and employer expectations; limited integration of transversal and digital skills.
Shift in Paradigm of Hospitality Education in Malaysia	Curriculum transformation, industry collaboration, global alignment	Transition to competency-based and outcome-oriented frameworks (Shariff & Razak, 2021). Growing focus on digital literacy, sustainability, and soft skills. Increased industry engagement in curriculum design and assessment (MOHE, 2015).	Gaps in leadership, teamwork, and ethical competencies; uneven adoption of digital and sustainable competencies.
Role of Employability in Industry	Contribution of employability to hospitality & tourism sector	Employability outcomes strengthen service quality, adaptability, and competitiveness (Giotis, 2022). Competency-based education enhances alignment with industry needs (Shariff & Razak, 2021).	Limited evidence on how employability contributes to long-term career progression and industry resilience.
Research Gap & State of the Art	Stakeholders' perspectives on employability outcomes	Prior research focused on students, educators, or graduates. Few multi-stakeholder studies exist.	Lack of holistic perspectives incorporating employers, policymakers, educators, and industry practitioners.

Note: Table content summarizes key themes from the literature. Sources include Giotis (2022), Harvey (2001), Shafie and Nayan (2010), UNESCO (2015), MOHE (2015), Economic Planning Unit (2015), Kenayathulla et al. (2019), Shariff and Razak (2021).

Conceptual Framework of the Study



This study is underpinned by Human Capital Theory and Stakeholder Theory, both of which provide the foundation for understanding the employability outcomes of TVET graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry. According to Human Capital Theory, education and training represent key investments that enhance individual productivity, job readiness, and long-term career development (Becker, 1993). Within the context of hospitality and tourism, this implies that TVET graduates who acquire relevant technical competencies, soft skills, and service-oriented attributes are more likely to achieve positive employability outcomes, such as job acquisition, retention, and career progression. Complementing this, Stakeholder Theory emphasizes that employability is not determined solely by individual graduates, but is co-constructed through the expectations and contributions of multiple actors in the education-to-employment ecosystem (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). For this study, four key stakeholder groups are identified: graduates, employers, educators, and policymakers. TVET graduates contribute their personal motivation, career aspirations, and skill readiness. Employers in the hospitality and tourism industry act as demand-side evaluators, assessing whether graduates possess the practical and interpersonal competencies required in a dynamic service environment (Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2018). Educators and TVET institutions shape outcomes through curriculum design, industry exposure, and pedagogical approaches that prepare students for workplace realities (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020). Finally, policymakers and government agencies establish national frameworks, funding mechanisms, and quality assurance systems that ensure TVET remains responsive to industry needs (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2021). This framework positions employability outcomes as the central construct influenced by stakeholder contributions and interactions. Employability is measured through indicators such as job placement, workplace adaptability, career progression, and employer satisfaction (Yorke, 2006). The conceptual model therefore highlights employability as a systemic outcome, reflecting the alignment of education, industry, and policy, rather than an isolated graduate attribute. Based on the framework, two hypotheses were developed for this study. The next section of the paper explains the hypotheses according to the framework.

H1: Curriculum relevance and the quality of industry exposure provided by educators positively affect graduate employability outcomes.

TVET institutions serve as the supply side of the labor market, responsible for equipping students with industry-relevant skills. Studies show that curricula aligned with industry standards and supported by practical training, such as internships, apprenticeships, and simulation-based learning, increase graduates' job readiness (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020). In Malaysia, efforts such as the National

TVET Policy 2021–2030 emphasize curriculum reform to improve graduate employability. If educators effectively integrate industry input into teaching and provide meaningful exposure through work-based learning, TVET graduates are more likely to demonstrate competence and adaptability in hospitality and tourism workplaces.

H2: Policymaker initiatives and supportive TVET policies enhance the employability outcomes of graduates in the hospitality and tourism sector.

National policies and government initiatives play a pivotal role in shaping the TVET ecosystem. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education and related agencies drive policies on skills development, industry partnerships, and quality assurance through frameworks such as the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) and the National TVET Policy (MOHE, 2021). Policies that encourage industry collaboration, provide funding for training infrastructure, and align TVET programs with national economic strategies directly influence employability outcomes. Without such policy interventions, TVET may risk producing graduates with outdated or misaligned skills. Therefore, policymakers act as enablers, ensuring systemic alignment between education, labor market needs, and economic development.

H3: Alignment among educators and policymakers leads to stronger employability outcomes compared to isolated stakeholder efforts.

Employability is a systemic construct, shaped not by individual effort alone but by the interaction of multiple stakeholders. If TVET graduates acquire skills, employers value them, institutions provide relevant curricula (H1), and policies support the ecosystem (H2), then employability outcomes are maximized. Studies in workforce development emphasize the importance of a whole of system approach, where collaboration among stakeholders ensures that supply meets demand (Knight & Yorke, 2003; UNESCO, 2020). For instance, employer input in curriculum design, policy-driven industry placements, and graduate adaptability together create a virtuous cycle. Hence, alignment across stakeholders is hypothesized to yield stronger employability outcomes than fragmented efforts.

3. METHODOLOGY

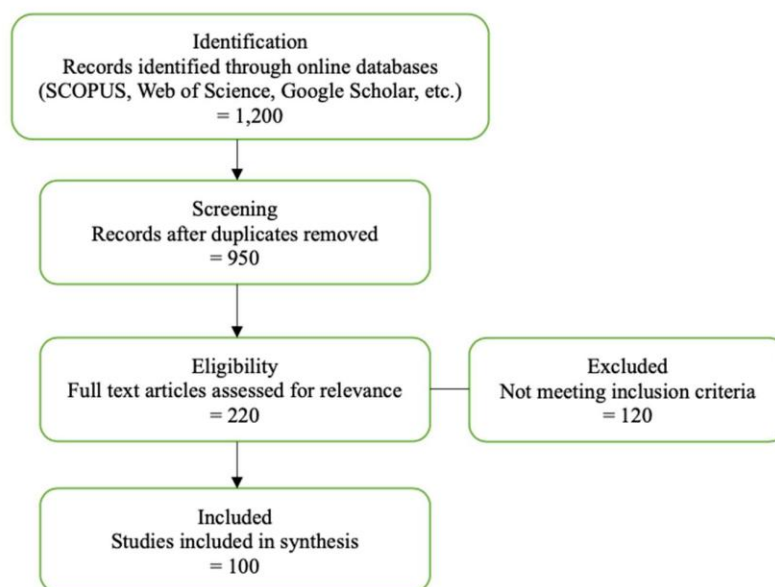
This study adopts a conceptual research design that relies on an extensive review and synthesis of secondary data to examine employability outcomes of TVET graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Conceptual papers, unlike empirical investigations, emphasize theory-building and the integration of existing knowledge to propose new insights, frameworks, or models (Jaakkola, 2020). In this regard, the methodology centers on systematically identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing scholarly literature and policy reports relevant to employability, TVET, and the hospitality and tourism sector.

The data sources for this study were drawn from online academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, as well as reputable international institutional repositories such as UNESCO-UNEVOC and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In addition, national policy documents such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015–2025), the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, and the Malaysia TVET Empowerment Agenda were included to contextualize employability outcomes within the national framework. The search strategy applied combinations of keywords such as “TVET graduates,” “hospitality employability,” “tourism education,” “stakeholders' perspectives,” and “skills mismatch”. Boolean operators (AND/OR) and truncations were used to refine results and ensure comprehensiveness.

To ensure the relevance and rigor of the sources, inclusion criteria required that studies be published in English, peer-reviewed journals, or official reports between 2000 and 2025, focusing on employability outcomes, TVET, or hospitality and tourism workforce development. Exclusion criteria eliminated opinion pieces without empirical or conceptual grounding, studies unrelated to employability in education, and sources lacking credibility. The literature analysis followed a narrative synthesis approach (Popay et al., 2006), which allowed integration of findings across diverse methodologies and contexts. Key themes were identified, categorized, and synthesized into four dimensions: (1) definitions of employability outcomes, TVET, and hospitality and tourism; (2) paradigm of employability outcomes in Malaysia's TVET; (3) shift in the paradigm of hospitality education; and (4) role of employability in sustaining the hospitality and tourism industry.

The methodological approach therefore ensures that the conceptual framework developed in this study rests on a robust foundation of current scholarship and authoritative policy sources. This strategy enables the identification of theoretical and practical gaps, contributes to state-of-the-art debates, and provides a basis for proposing future research and policy interventions on the employability of TVET graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry.

PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM OF LITERATURE SELECTION



4. DISCUSSION

One of the most pressing challenges in enhancing employability outcomes among TVET graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry is the persistent mismatch between industry expectations and graduates' actual competencies. While graduates often recognize the importance of employability attributes such as teamwork, leadership, and ethical conduct, they tend to report lower levels of competence in these very areas (Kenayathulla et al., 2019). This discrepancy highlights a gap between perceived importance and actual readiness. Industry employers also emphasize the increasing significance of soft skills, such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, and professionalism that are often underdeveloped in graduates (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024). Such deficits in non-technical

competencies directly undermine graduates' job readiness, particularly in hospitality settings where customer service, communication, and interpersonal interactions are central to professional performance.

Another challenge lies in the inconsistency and limited quality of industrial exposure and internships, which are critical for transitioning graduates from the classroom to the workplace. While industrial training is designed to provide experiential learning, not all placements achieve the same outcomes. For example, Mazlan et al. (2023) showed that culinary students improved after internships; however, disruptions in the supply chain and variability in internship experiences reduced the overall benefits of such programs. Similarly, Ismail, Zahari, and Thamby Chik (2024) found that mentorship and a positive work environment during industrial training strongly influenced students' career intentions, underscoring that the quality, not just the presence of internships matters. Poorly structured or inconsistent work-based learning therefore remains a significant barrier to employability.

Curriculum relevance presents another key concern in achieving employability outcomes. The hospitality and tourism industry is highly dynamic, shaped by technological innovation, sustainability imperatives, and evolving customer expectations. However, TVET curricula often lag behind these changes, leading to graduates who are insufficiently prepared for contemporary workplace demands. Halik Bassah and Mohd Noor (2023) found that industry experts consistently highlighted gaps in critical thinking, entrepreneurial competencies, and digital literacy among graduates, pointing to inadequacies in curriculum design and delivery. Likewise, Kenayathulla et al. (2019) observed that skills recognized by students as vital, including ethical decision-making and leadership were insufficiently emphasized in training programs. This suggests a pressing need for curriculum reforms that balance technical competencies with soft, digital, and entrepreneurial skills.

The effectiveness of employability preparation is also strongly influenced by the quality of mentorship, supervision, and institutional capacity. Ismail et al. (2024) emphasized that strong mentorship and supportive work environments enhanced students' motivation to pursue careers in hospitality and tourism, while high turnover rates in training sites negatively affected the quality of industrial exposure. In addition, challenges persist at the institutional level. Instructors often face difficulties in updating their skills, particularly in areas such as digital competence, communication, and industry-aligned practices (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024). These challenges undermine institutions' ability to deliver high-quality training that adequately prepares graduates for the realities of the hospitality workplace.

Finally, broader structural and systemic issues pose barriers to employability outcomes. Fragmented policy implementation, insufficient coordination between institutions and industry, and uneven quality across different TVET providers limit the ability to produce consistently employable graduates. For instance, Ismail, Chik, and Hemdi (2021) reported that while employability outcomes for TVET graduates were strong overall, specific programs such as tourism management recorded notably lower employment rates, reflecting structural inconsistencies across sub-sectors. Moreover, industry input is not always fully integrated into program design or policy initiatives, weakening the alignment between supply and demand (Halik Bassah & Mohd Noor, 2023). These systemic challenges suggest that isolated efforts, such as improving curricula without addressing policy fragmentation or institutional limitations will likely fall short in delivering sustainable employability outcomes for graduates in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry.

To address the persistent skills mismatch, TVET institutions in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism sector should strengthen the integration of soft skills and employability competencies within

the curriculum. Beyond technical training, programs should emphasize communication, teamwork, problem solving, and ethical decision-making through project-based learning, simulations, and reflective assessments. Embedding employability skills across subjects, rather than treating them as add-ons, would ensure that graduates develop both technical proficiency and holistic professional capabilities (Kenayathulla et al., 2019; Dzia-Uddin et al., 2024). Partnerships with industry can also help identify which soft skills are most in demand, allowing for targeted interventions that enhance job readiness.

Second, TVET institutions must strengthen industry linkages and ensure consistent, high-quality internships. Industrial training should be standardized across providers to guarantee minimum levels of exposure to real workplace practices. Formal agreements between TVET institutions and hospitality employers could ensure structured mentorship, clear learning objectives, and regular monitoring of students' progress (Mazlan et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2024). Government agencies such as the Ministry of Higher Education could play a coordinating role by developing frameworks that define quality benchmarks for internships, ensuring all students benefit equally from meaningful work-based learning experiences.

Third, continuous capacity building for instructors is essential to improve curriculum delivery and alignment with industry practices. Professional development initiatives should focus on enhancing instructors' digital literacy, communication skills, and knowledge of emerging hospitality trends, such as sustainability and Service 4.0 technologies. Providing incentives for instructors to engage in industrial attachments or collaborative projects with hospitality businesses would also narrow the gap between academic training and industry realities (Halik Bassah & Mohd Noor, 2023). Investments in teaching facilities and digital infrastructure will further support instructors in delivering high-quality, industry-relevant training.

Finally, systemic reforms are necessary to overcome structural and policy-related barriers. Stronger coordination among ministries, agencies, and industry stakeholders is required to align TVET policies with labor market demands. Establishing a central body to oversee curriculum standardization, employer engagement, and graduate tracking could reduce fragmentation and ensure accountability. Additionally, policies should incentivize hospitality and tourism employers to provide structured mentorship and career pathways for TVET graduates, thereby creating a more sustainable talent pipeline for the industry (Ismail et al., 2021). These reforms would ensure that employability outcomes are not left to individual institutions alone but are supported by systemic collaboration and policy alignment.

The findings of this study also carry significant implications for theory, practice, and policy. From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to employability research by applying Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) to the TVET context in Malaysia. By highlighting the interdependence of graduates, educators, employers, and policymakers, the study reinforces the idea that employability is not an individual attribute alone but a systemic outcome shaped by stakeholder collaboration. In terms of practice, the study underscores the importance of curriculum reform, industrial exposure, and instructor development as practical levers to improve employability outcomes. TVET institutions can use these findings to redesign programs that not only teach technical skills but also cultivate soft skills, digital competencies, and workplace readiness.

From a policy standpoint, the study highlights the need for greater alignment and coordination among stakeholders in Malaysia's TVET ecosystem. Policymakers must consider creating a comprehensive framework that aligns institutional curricula with industry demands while ensuring accountability for graduate outcomes. Such frameworks could also facilitate cross-sector partnerships,

funding for digital infrastructure, and continuous professional development for instructors. Finally, the study provides implications for future research, suggesting the need for longitudinal studies that track graduates' career trajectories and assess how specific interventions (e.g., mentorship programs, digital skills integration) affect employability outcomes over time. Comparative studies across different countries in Asia could also deepen understanding of how cultural, institutional, and policy contexts shape employability, offering lessons for Malaysia and beyond.

In sum, the challenges identified from skills mismatches and limited internship quality to curriculum gaps, instructor capacity, and systemic fragmentation, highlight the multifaceted nature of employability in Malaysia's hospitality and tourism TVET sector. Addressing these challenges requires not only institutional reforms but also stronger collaboration among employers, educators, and policymakers to align training with labor market realities. The strategic recommendations proposed integrating soft skills, standardizing industrial exposure, enhancing instructor development, and reforming policy coordination, offer a practical pathway forward. These align with the study's broader implications for theory, practice, and policy, reinforcing the view that employability is best understood as a collective, systemic outcome rather than an individual trait.

5. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper has sought to integrate diverse perspectives on the employability outcomes of TVET graduates within Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry, highlighting the significance of aligning education, industry expectations, and national development goals. Employability is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing not only technical proficiency but also transferable skills such as communication, adaptability, creativity, and problem-solving (Yorke, 2006; Finch et al., 2013). These competencies are particularly vital in the hospitality and tourism industry, where service excellence, cultural sensitivity, and innovation are central to competitiveness (Baum, 2019; Richardson, 2019). The shift in the paradigm of hospitality education in Malaysia, from traditional vocational training towards outcome-based and industry-relevant learning, underscores the need to rethink how employability is cultivated and assessed (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [MOHE], 2015; Subramaniam, 2020).

By synthesizing insights from Malaysian and international contexts, this paper emphasizes the critical role of employability in sustaining the hospitality and tourism industry as a driver of economic growth, cultural promotion, and service innovation (UNESCO, 2016; Suhairom et al., 2014). At the same time, the analysis revealed persistent gaps, particularly the misalignment between educational outputs and industry requirements, the limited integration of soft skills in TVET curricula, and the need for greater stakeholder collaboration (Majumdar, 2019; Ismail et al., 2018). These gaps present opportunities for theoretical advancement and policy intervention, positioning employability outcomes as a strategic focus for both human capital development and national competitiveness.

The state of the art in the current scholarly debate suggests a growing consensus on the multi-stakeholder nature of employability, where policymakers, educators, industry practitioners, and graduates themselves must share responsibility for fostering sustainable workforce readiness (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Jackson, 2016). This study contributes to this discourse by proposing a conceptual framework that situates employability outcomes as a dynamic intersection of education policy, industry demand, and individual capability. Future research may build on this framework by empirically testing stakeholder perspectives, assessing curriculum reforms, and exploring innovative pedagogical

approaches that balance technical competencies with transferable skills (Clarke, 2018; Tran, 2015).

In conclusion, strengthening the employability of TVET graduates is not only pivotal to the advancement of Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry but also to the broader agenda of national socio-economic development. By addressing the identified gaps and drawing from global best practices, Malaysia has the potential to position its TVET system as a model for producing graduates who are resilient, adaptable, and capable of thriving in an ever-evolving service economy (Baum et al., 2020; OECD, 2018).

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