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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY AFTER GRADUATION

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ABSTRACT

In today's highly competitive job market, students' perceptions of their employability upon graduation play a crucial role in shaping their career tracks. Understanding these perceptions is essential for educational institutions and policymakers striving to enhance graduate readiness and workforce integration. This study explores the key factors that influence students' confidence in securing employment, including academic preparedness, practical experience, professional networking, and personal attitudes toward career development. By examining how these elements contribute to students' readiness for the workforce, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that shape their employability outlook. Additionally, it explores the extent to which students feel equipped to navigate the job market, addressing both the enablers and barriers to career success. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of student employability perceptions, offering recommendations for improving educational strategies and career support initiatives to foster greater confidence and competitiveness among graduates.

KEYWORDS: Confidence, Employability, Job Market, Students' Perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition from university life to the professional world is a defining moment in every student's life, marking the culmination of years of academic pursuit and the beginning of their career journey. This period is often characterized by a blend of excitement, uncertainty, and apprehension as graduates prepare to navigate the competitive job market. A key determinant of students' success in securing employment is their perception of employability, which refers to their confidence in their ability to obtain and sustain meaningful employment. This perception is shaped by various factors, including academic preparation, industry exposure, practical work experience, networking opportunities, and personal career aspirations. The process of job searching post-graduation is not merely a transactional phase but a transformational journey that involves the integration of learned knowledge, skills, and market expectations into professional practice. Graduates must internalize the realities of the labor market, where academic credentials alone are often insufficient to secure employment. Instead, the ability to demonstrate competency, adaptability, and problem-solving skills plays a significant role in employability. The current job market is highly dynamic, complex, and continuously evolving, driven by technological advancements, globalization, and shifting economic trends. These transformations have reshaped employer expectations and hiring practices, making it imperative for graduates to possess a diverse skill set beyond traditional academic qualifications (Gokul Thirunavukarasu, 2020). Today's graduates encounter numerous challenges, including rapid technological disruptions, global economic uncertainty, fluctuating job markets, and increased employer expectations. Many organizations no longer rely solely on academic performance to evaluate job candidates but instead emphasize hands-on experience, critical thinking abilities, digital literacy, and cross-disciplinary skills. This shift has led to a growing disconnect between university education and industry needs, raising concerns about graduates' preparedness to enter the workforce. In some cases, students lack clarity about career pathways or feel underprepared to compete with experienced job seekers, further exacerbating their anxiety regarding employability. Understanding students' perceptions of employability has therefore become a critical area of research, providing valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions on how to better support students in their transition from academia to

the workforce (Derek Glover, 2002). The transition is often influenced by the availability of structured career guidance, internship opportunities, mentorship programs, and exposure to industry professionals. Research has shown that graduates who actively engage in career development activities, networking events, and internship placements exhibit higher confidence levels in their ability to secure employment (Chiara Succi, 2019). However, students who lack access to these opportunities often struggle with self-doubt, limited career awareness, and difficulty adapting to employer expectations. One of the most pressing challenges in graduate employability is the skills mismatch between higher education and labor market demands. Many employers report that fresh graduates struggle with applying theoretical knowledge in practical settings, leading to concerns about their workplace readiness (World Economic Forum, 2022). Employers frequently cite deficiencies in soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership, alongside gaps in technical expertise and industry-specific competencies. This mismatch highlights the need for universities to adopt more experiential learning approaches, incorporating internships, project-based learning, apprenticeships, and case studies into academic curricula. Additionally, institutions should foster partnerships with industry leaders to provide students with real-world exposure and mentorship opportunities. Such initiatives can enhance graduates' confidence in their abilities, strengthen their employability prospects, and better prepare them for the realities of professional life. Beyond academic preparedness, work experience and industry exposure play a crucial role in shaping students' employability confidence. Studies indicate that graduates with prior internships, volunteer experiences, or part-time work are significantly more likely to secure full-time employment than those without practical experience (Gokul Thirunavukarasu, 2020). Employers often favor candidates who have demonstrated workplace competency, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities in real-world scenarios. This has led to an increased emphasis on work-integrated learning (WIL) programs, where students engage in hands-on training, industry collaborations, and co-op placements to bridge the gap between education and employment. However, not all students have equal access to work experience opportunities, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas, or underrepresented communities. Limited access to professional networks, financial constraints, and a

lack of career guidance often hinder students' ability to gain relevant work experience, affecting their confidence and job prospects. Addressing these disparities requires institutions and policymakers to expand internship availability, offer financial support for unpaid placements, and establish mentorship initiatives to support marginalized students. Another significant factor influencing students' perceptions of employability is the role of professional networking and industry connections. The modern job market is increasingly relationship-driven, with many employment opportunities emerging through professional referrals, alumni networks, and industry partnerships. According to Derek Glover, students who actively engage in networking, attend career fairs, and participate in mentorship programs develop greater confidence in their job-seeking abilities and career prospects. Platforms such as LinkedIn, professional networking groups, and industry associations have further enabled graduates to connect with potential employers, showcase their expertise, and access job openings beyond traditional application processes. However, many students struggle with networking due to a lack of confidence, limited exposure to industry professionals, or inadequate guidance on how to build professional relationships. To mitigate these challenges, universities must incorporate networking skills training into career development programs, encourage students to participate in professional events, and facilitate mentorship pairings with industry leaders. While academic preparation, work experience, and networking play integral roles in employability, personal mindset and career confidence also significantly influence how graduates perceive their readiness for the workforce. Research on self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) suggests that individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to take initiative, persist through job search challenges, and embrace new career opportunities. Graduates who have clear career goals, a strong sense of adaptability, and a proactive approach to professional development tend to experience greater confidence and success in securing employment. Conversely, students who lack clarity about their career aspirations often experience self-doubt, anxiety, and difficulty navigating the job market. Universities can support students in building career confidence by offering career counseling services, goal-setting workshops, and resilience training programs that help students develop a growth-oriented mindset and strategic career planning skills. In addition to individual and institutional factors, economic conditions and labor

market trends significantly impact graduates' employment prospects. The job market is subject to economic fluctuations, industry disruptions, and changing workforce demands, which can influence the availability of job opportunities for new graduates. For example, during economic downturns, companies often implement hiring freezes, reduce entry-level positions, or shift towards contract-based employment, making it harder for recent graduates to secure stable jobs (Adela García-Aracil, 2018). Conversely, economic booms stimulate job creation and workforce expansion, increasing hiring opportunities in high-growth sectors such as technology, healthcare, renewable energy, and data science. To remain competitive, graduates must adapt to industry shifts, continuously upskill, and align their career goals with emerging job market trends. Institutions can play a role in future-proofing graduates' careers by providing up-to-date labor market insights, offering specialized industry certifications, and integrating career adaptability training into curricula. Overall, the transition from university to employment is influenced by multiple interdependent factors, including academic training, work experience, industry networking, career confidence, and labor market conditions. Understanding students' perceptions of employability is crucial in shaping education-to-employment strategies that empower graduates to successfully enter the workforce. By strengthening university-industry partnerships, expanding access to experiential learning opportunities, and fostering a proactive career mindset, stakeholders can ensure that graduates are well-prepared, resilient, and equipped to thrive in an evolving job market.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. *Exploring Employment Opportunities after Graduation*

Graduating from higher education marks a pivotal transition in students' lives as they navigate the challenging and uncertain process of securing employment. In today's highly competitive job market, this transition is increasingly complex due to a surplus of graduates, evolving employer expectations, and fluctuating economic conditions. Many employers now demand specialized skill sets, hands-on experience, and adaptability, making it harder for fresh graduates to secure jobs that align with their qualifications (Andrew Rothwell, 2009).

The disconnect between academic preparation and industry demands often leads to anxiety and self-doubt among graduates, affecting their confidence in entering the workforce. Several factors

influence students' employability perceptions, including academic preparedness, industry exposure, economic trends, career support services, personal attributes, and workplace inclusivity. Educational institutions, policymakers, and employers must work together to address these barriers and create a supportive framework that enhances graduate readiness. This discussion explores the key challenges and enables shaping graduates' employability confidence, focusing on skills mismatches, economic influences, institutional roles, personal development, workforce inclusivity, and mental well-being.

2.2. Factors Influencing Students' Entry into the Workforce

2.2.1. Transition from Education to Employment

The shift from structured academic environments to dynamic workspaces is often overwhelming for graduates, particularly those lacking real-world experience. Unlike the predictable nature of academic assessments, workplaces demand adaptability, problem-solving, and the ability to work under pressure. Many students enter the job market without fully grasping professional expectations, workplace culture, or employer demands, which can lead to uncertainty and hesitation. A study has shown that when it comes to university, many people follow the trend of achieving good A-levels, attending university, obtaining a good degree, and securing a good job.

Table 1: Shows the Years of Study.

| | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Personal Factors | Less Employable | More Employable |
| Market Factors | Less Employable | More Employable |

Source: Study of personal and market factors.

The arrows indicate that students perceived themselves to be more employable in terms of personal factors, but less employable in terms of market factors, as they progress through their years of university study (William E. Donald, 2018). Students' reflections through the case study reveal how, as reality sinks in, they begin to understand that everyone is graduating around the same time, and many start saying, "I can't find a job." They realize that it can take six months, a year, or even eighteen months of job hunting, and that securing a position isn't immediate. They come to see that thousands of others are also vying for the same roles, and that they may not be as easily employable as they initially believed.

2.3. Mismatch of Skills

One of the most significant barriers to employment is the gap between academic learning and job market requirements. While universities emphasize theoretical knowledge, employers prioritize practical skills, industry-relevant competencies, and workplace adaptability (Chiara Succi, 2019). Many graduates find that their studies do not fully prepare them for technical tasks, problem-solving scenarios, and collaborative teamwork skills that are essential in modern workplaces. Employers frequently highlight deficiencies in graduates' communication skills, leadership abilities, analytical thinking, and industry-specific technical expertise. This discrepancy results in longer job search durations,

lower starting salaries, and reduced job satisfaction among new graduates. To bridge this gap, universities should integrate work-integrated learning (WIL), internships, project-based training, and industry mentorships into their curricula. By exposing students to real-world work scenarios, educational institutions can significantly enhance their confidence and competence in professional settings.

3. ECONOMIC INFLUENCES ON GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

3.1. The Impact of Economic Conditions on Employability

The job market is directly influenced by economic trends, labor market demands, and global financial stability. Economic downturns create hiring freezes, company downsizing, and industry contractions, reducing job opportunities for new graduates.

3.1.1. Job Market Fluctuations and Industry Trends

Periods of economic uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have demonstrated the vulnerability of recent graduates in job markets. During the pandemic, many companies postponed hiring, withdrew job offers, and implemented workforce reductions, leaving graduates in highly uncertain situations (Adela García-Aracil, 2018). Those entering the workforce during recessions often experience lower wages, longer job searches, and

career stagnation in the early years. Conversely, during economic growth periods, industries expand, creating greater job stability and higher demand for specialized skills. Graduates who align their skill sets with emerging sectors, such as artificial intelligence, renewable energy, cybersecurity, and digital marketing, have a competitive advantage over peers who lack industry-specific expertise. Moreover, the rise of remote work, freelancing, and the economy has created alternative employment pathways, allowing graduates to explore global job opportunities beyond traditional employment structures. To improve employability prospects, universities should incorporate market-driven education models that prepare students for high-demand fields. Additionally, students must actively pursue upskilling opportunities, industry certifications, and digital competencies to remain adaptable in an evolving job market.

4. THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

4.1. Career Development and Institutional Support

Higher education institutions play a critical role in enhancing graduate employability by providing career guidance, fostering industry collaborations, and supporting lifelong learning initiatives. Universities that lack structured career development programs often produce graduates who struggle with job searches, networking, and professional development.

4.1.1. Enhancing Career Services and Job Readiness

A well-structured career support system can significantly improve graduates' job search success and confidence levels. Institutions should provide career workshops, mentorship programs, job placement services, and networking events that allow students to connect with potential employers. By integrating resume-building training, mock interviews, and professional coaching, universities can better prepare students for workplace demands and hiring processes. Partnerships between educational institutions and industries should be strengthened to create internship pipelines, co-op programs, and research collaborations, ensuring that graduates gain hands-on experience before entering the job market.

4.2. Personal Factors and Graduate Mindset

4.2.1. Confidence, Self-Efficacy, and

Professional Growth

Personal mindset and self-belief significantly influence graduates' employability perceptions and career success. Students with high self-efficacy tend to demonstrate greater resilience, proactive job-seeking behaviors, and higher adaptability in professional environments.

4.2.2. Building a Growth Mindset for Career Success

A growth mindset encourages students to view challenges as opportunities for learning rather than barriers to success. Graduates who engage in networking, mentorship programs, and leadership training are better positioned to navigate job market complexities. Universities should encourage students to actively participate in industry events, professional workshops, and community initiatives, which strengthen confidence, career clarity, and employability. Furthermore, digital networking on platforms such as LinkedIn provides students with access to job opportunities, employer connections, and professional endorsements, giving them an advantage in competitive hiring environments.

4.3. Diversity, Inclusivity, and Equity in Employment

4.3.1. The Importance of Equal Opportunities

Ensuring fair hiring practices and workplace inclusivity is essential for providing equitable job opportunities for graduates from diverse backgrounds (Tymon, 2011). Many students, particularly those from underrepresented communities, face systemic barriers in securing employment due to lack of industry connections, unconscious bias, and limited access to professional development resources.

4.3.1. Addressing Biases in Hiring Practices

Organizations must implement transparent recruitment processes, unbiased selection criteria, and diversity initiatives to ensure fair employment opportunities. Mentorship programs, workplace inclusive training, and networking opportunities for marginalized students can bridge employment gaps and foster workplace equity. Graduates from diverse backgrounds should be encouraged to seek out diversity-focused networking groups, industry scholarships, and leadership programs that provide additional career support.

4.4. Mental Health and Well-Being in Job Searching

4.4.1. Stress, Anxiety, and Career Resilience

The pressure to secure employment can lead to heightened stress, job search fatigue, and mental health struggles among graduates. Extended job-hunting periods, financial instability, and societal expectations often contribute to feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and burnout.

4.4.2. Promoting Mental Health Awareness

To support graduates’ well-being, universities and employers must provide access to mental health services, peer support networks, and stress management workshops. Employers should cultivate a workplace culture that values work-life balance, professional development, and psychological well-being. Graduates should also prioritize self-care, career coaching, and resilience training to navigate job market uncertainties more effectively (Hannu Rätty, 2018).

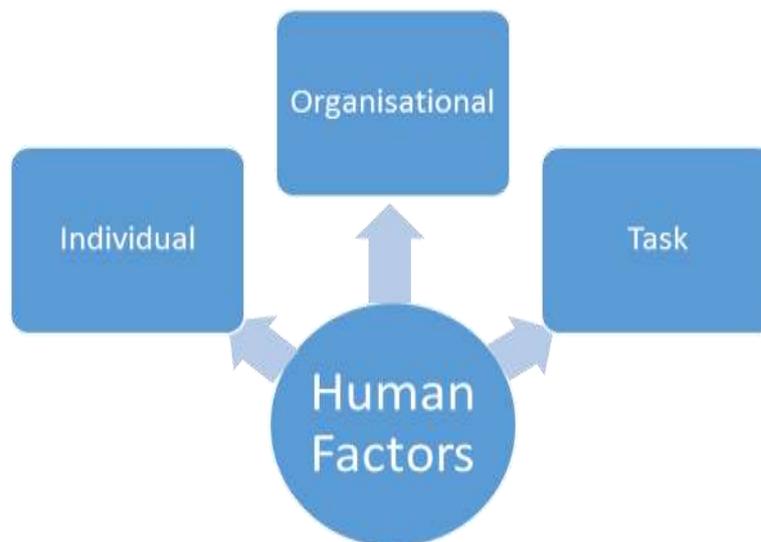


Figure 1: Factors that Influence Behavior at Work.

The organization shapes its employees and their behavior, such as the organization's values, beliefs, and practices. The leadership and management of the team must run smoothly so that new graduates can learn from and be inspired and motivated by their employers (Cristina Sin, 2016). Communication must be transparent, open and clear enough for the newly graduated to understand and work accordingly. Most of all, the working environment, such as access

to resources, must be enough for employees to feel welcome at work (Sultoni, 2023). As new graduates entering the workplace, many of them are unaware of regulations and tasks they are assigned to do. Employers must train all the new graduates in all their departments, mainly known as cadet training, so that the work runs smoothly and later in the future, the workload is easily shared and managed.

Table 2: Factors Contribute to Students' Perceptions as the Final Year Students and Entering the Workforce Field.

| | |
|---|--|
| Academic Performance | Many students always compare their grades and GPA according to their performance. This is because achieving a good grade in the final year creates a confidence level in the student, and as they step up for an interview and start new jobs, that confidence is carried with them. |
| Practical and Internship | Practice makes graduates more marketable upon graduation and starting with new jobs. Through this, students can choose and identify their career path in advance. However, internship train students in critical development skills, problem solving and making wise decisions when working in an organization |
| Networking Opportunities and Career Support Service | Keeping connections with people is important as the new graduates enter the workforce (Chinyamurindi, 2018). Through this work it is easily done and many opportunities come along to get successful in future. |

Source: Final Year Students Entering Job Market

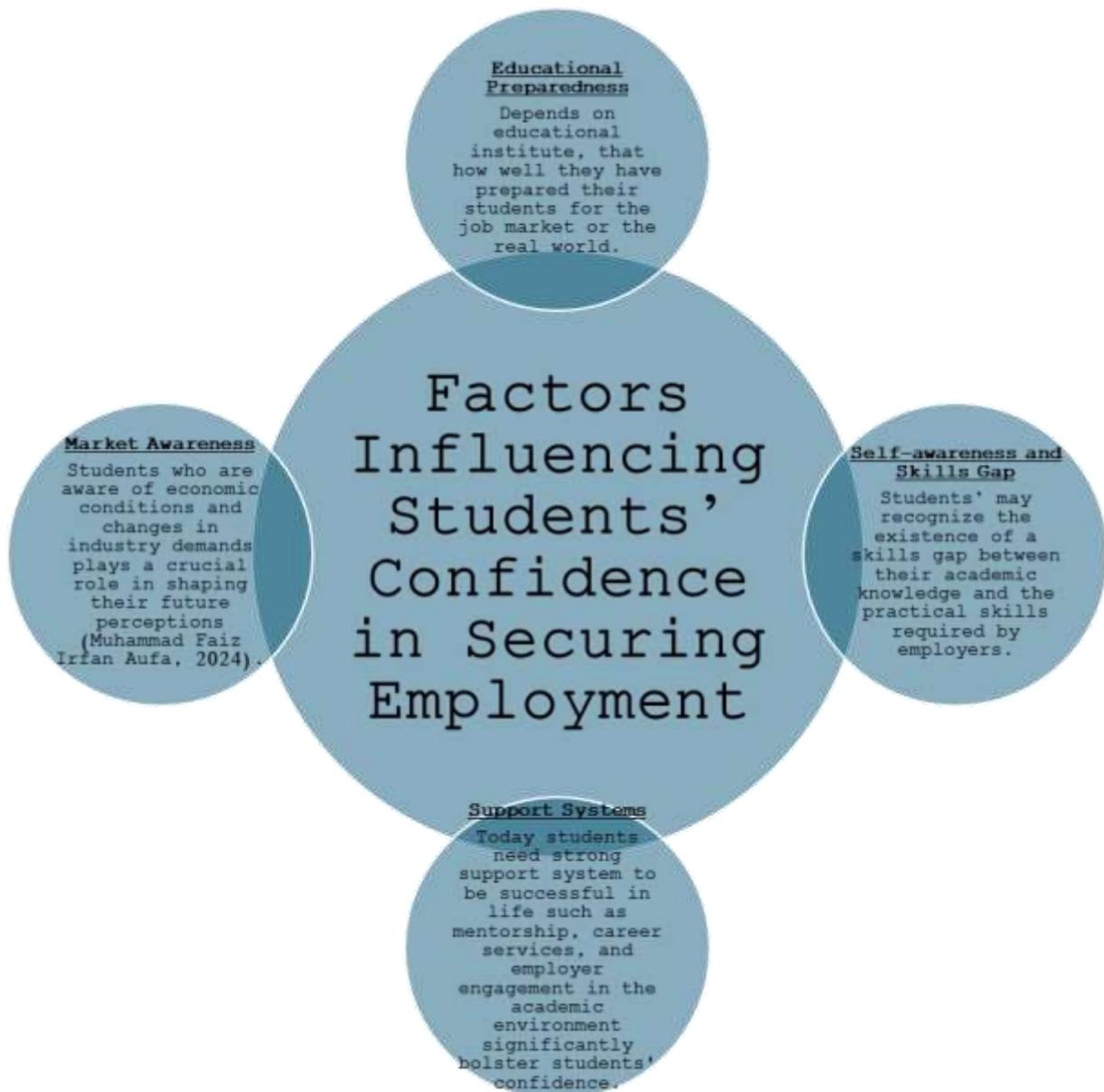


Figure 2: Factors Influencing Students' Confidence in Searching for Jobs in the Job Market. Showing the Four Ways of Students' Confidence in Securing Employment.

Source: Factors Influencing Students' Confidence in Searching for Jobs in the Job Market.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the data in Figure 1, many students remain optimistic about their career prospects for post-graduation. This confidence is often shaped by a range of external factors, including the relevance of their academic qualifications, availability of internships, alignment of education with industry demands, economic conditions, and the importance of professional networking. Students who have gained practical work experience, built industry connections, and developed transferable skills tend to have a higher perception of their employability, whereas those who lack these opportunities often

face self-doubt and anxiety regarding their prospects (Gokul Thirunavukarasu, 2020). Many graduates feel unprepared for job responsibilities because of the disconnect between academic instruction and industry demands (Chiara Succi, 2019). Employers frequently prioritize practical skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and digital literacy—areas that are not always sufficiently developed within traditional university curricula. To address this issue, higher education institutions need to reform their programs by incorporating experiential learning approaches. This would help ensure that graduates are not only knowledgeable but also adept at applying theoretical concepts in

real-world scenarios. Such a shift would better align academic training with labor market needs, boosting graduates' confidence and their ability to adapt to changing job requirements. Another essential factor influencing graduate employability is work experience, which serves as a bridge between education and professional practice. Many employers now expect entry-level candidates to have relevant work experience, making internships, apprenticeships, and part-time jobs valuable assets in a graduate's portfolio. Studies indicate that graduates with internship experience are twice as likely to secure employment as compared to those without practical exposure (Derek Glover, 2002). Unfortunately, access to internships is often unequal, with some students facing barriers due to lack of industry connections, geographic limitations, and financial constraints. Universities can play a more active role in expanding internship opportunities, ensuring that all students—regardless of background—have equal access to real-world experience before graduation. Implementing paid internships, industry partnerships, and co-op programs could significantly enhance students' practical skills, industry knowledge, and employability confidence. Economic conditions also play a major role in shaping students' perceptions of employability. Global job markets are constantly evolving, influenced by technological advancements, automation, and changing economic trends. For instance, while some sectors are experiencing job growth, others are shrinking due to technological disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered hiring patterns, with many industries reducing entry-level job openings and shifting toward contract-based employment (Adela García-Aracil, 2018). Graduates entering the workforce during economic downturns often face longer job searches, lower starting salaries, and increased competition from experienced professionals. To mitigate these effects, universities should provide students with labor market insights, career adaptability training, and guidance on emerging employment trends, helping them navigate economic uncertainties and explore alternative career pathways. Networking and professional connections have become increasingly important in securing employment, with many job opportunities arising from referrals, industry contacts, and professional associations rather than traditional job applications. According to research, graduates who actively engage in networking events, career fairs, and mentorship programs have a competitive edge over those who rely solely on online applications.

However, many students lack the confidence or skills to engage in networking effectively. Universities should integrate networking workshops, LinkedIn training, and alumni mentorship programs to help students develop professional relationships that enhance job opportunities. Facilitating direct engagement between students and industry professionals can increase students' confidence in their employability and provide them with insights into the expectations of potential employers. The development of soft skills plays a crucial role in shaping graduate employability perceptions. Many employers value candidates who demonstrate strong communication abilities, leadership qualities, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, alongside their technical knowledge. Unfortunately, these skills are often overlooked in academic environments, leaving many graduates inadequately prepared for workplace interactions. Educational institutions should incorporate soft skills training into their curricula, provide leadership development programs, problem-solving workshops, and team-based projects to help students build these vital competencies. Graduates who combine solid interpersonal skills with technical expertise are more likely to secure and succeed in professional roles. To enhance graduate success, universities must adopt a proactive approach in shaping students' perceptions of employability. This includes strengthening career services, offering personalized career counseling, increasing engagement with industry, and promoting entrepreneurship initiatives. Career development efforts should go beyond traditional resume writing and interview preparation, emphasizing long-term employability strategies, personal branding, and ongoing learning. Encouraging students to pursue lifelong learning, adapt to industry changes, and upskill in emerging technologies will help them remain competitive in a constantly evolving job market. Overall, student perceptions of employability are influenced by a multitude of interrelated factors, including academic relevance, access to work experience, networking opportunities, economic conditions, and skill development. While many graduates remain hopeful about their job prospects, concerns regarding job market competitiveness, alignment of education with employer expectations, and economic instability persist. Universities, employers, and policymakers must collaborate to create supportive, skills-focused learning environments that prepare graduates not only for immediate employment but also for long-term career success. By taking a comprehensive, forward-thinking approach, institutions can

significantly enhance students' confidence, optimism, competence, and career resilience. employability, and professional readiness, ensuring that they transition into the workforce with

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