Fostering Career Readiness among Final Year Students: Lived Experiences of Counselors in Public Institutions of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The transition from higher education to the workforce presents significant challenges for graduating students, particularly in aligning academic preparation with industry expectations. In Malaysia, counsellors in Public Institutions of Higher Education (PIHE) play a crucial role in equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed for career readiness. Despite this important function, limited research has explored the lived experiences and effective strategies employed by these counsellors in facilitating students' career development. This study addresses this gap by examining the practices of counsellors within selected Malaysian PIHEs, aiming to shed light on their contributions in enhancing graduate employability. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of counsellors in Malaysian PIHEs, focusing on the strategies they use to foster career readiness among graduating students. In-depth interviews were conducted with six counsellors from Public Institutions of Higher Education (PIHE) located in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Perak, Malaysia. The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, which identified five strategies used by the counsellors: organizing programs and workshops, designing career modules, collaborating with industry, conducting group counselling sessions, and providing individual coaching. The findings will furnish empirical evidence to help graduate programs, educators, and novice counselors in assisting graduating students with the transition into the workforce.

Keywords: Lived Experiences, Counsellors, Career Readiness, Final Year Students

1. Introduction

In 2023, statistics reported 5.74 million Malaysian graduates, representing a 4.2% increase from the previous year, with over two-thirds working in skilled occupations. Chief Statistician Datuk Seri Mohd Uzir Mahidin attributed this growth to a favorable economic climate and improved labor market conditions throughout the year. He also noted that graduates made up 22.3% of the working-age group aged 15 and above. He further stated that the number of employed graduates rose by 4.9%, reaching 4.76 million in 2023, up from 4.53 million in 2022. This is a sign of continued recovery and strengthening in the job market (Malaymail, 2023).

Although the number of unemployed graduates has declined, underemployment remains a significant concern. In 2023, an estimated 32.4% of graduates were working in roles that did not match their qualification levels, highlighting the ongoing issue of skill-related underemployment

(BUSINESSTODAY, 2024). Furthermore, a 2020 survey by Talent Bank highlighted growing concerns among employers regarding the job readiness of local fresh graduates in Malaysia (Wong, 2021). This issue extends beyond Malaysia, as evidenced by a study titled "Graduate Work-Readiness in the Asia-Pacific Region," which examined employer perceptions of fresh graduates in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia. The study revealed a consensus among employers in these countries that fresh graduates lack preparedness for their careers. Specifically, Malaysian graduates are criticized for deficiencies in critical thinking, communication skills, and proficiency in languages, particularly English. Consequently, employers encounter challenges in hiring fresh graduates who possess the necessary qualifications, skills, and personal attributes.

One of the challenges concerning the readiness of graduates for the workforce in Malaysia is the deficiency in soft skills (Teng et al., 2019). Soft skills encompass a range of abilities, traits, and attitudes that reflect an individual's personality, attitude, and behavior. Malaysian graduates demonstrate gaps in soft skills, particularly in areas such as self-confidence, time management, communication abilities, problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and leadership capabilities (Nazron et al., 2017). Additionally, feedback from industry underscores concerns about the absence of positive work ethic, teamwork abilities, decision-making skills, effective communication, and leadership qualities, all of which impact graduate employability in Malaysia (Nazron et al., 2017).

The literature also addresses the issue of inadequate English proficiency among graduates (Verma et al., 2018). The inability to communicate effectively in English poses a significant barrier to employment for graduates and presents a major challenge for employers when considering hiring local graduates (Zainuddin et al., 2019). Another concern regarding graduate unemployment in Malaysia is the lack of work experience (Azmi et al., 2018). As noted by Belwal and colleagues (2017), employers seeking to hire graduates typically expect them to possess some level of practical experience in the field. Work experience stands as a crucial factor that many companies consider before deciding to hire local graduates, thus creating a difficulty for recent graduates who often lack substantial professional experience.

Given this concern, some studies in Malaysia focused on external factors influencing career readiness among university students, including career readiness programs, learning programs, and initiatives by the Ministry of Higher Education (Bikar et al., 2023; Musa & Mat Rashid, 2020; Paul et al., 2022; Yusoff et al., 2024). Meanwhile, numerous studies emphasized internal factors affecting career readiness, such as critical skills, self-concept, and self-efficacy (Adnan et al., 2021; Balan et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2020; Mani & Wan Mustaffa, 2024; Rachmawati et al., 2024). However, there is a lack of research focused on counselors' initiatives in enhancing university students' career readiness (Bowering & Frigault, 2025; Yusoff et al., 2024). Therefore, the current study aims to explore the lived experiences of counselors in Malaysian public institutions of higher education, fostering career readiness among final year students. Study findings will help graduate programs, educators, and novice counselors in assisting final year students with the transition into the workforce.

1.1. Research Objective

To explore the lived experiences of counsellors in Malaysian Public Institutions of Higher Education (PIHE) in fostering career readiness among final year students.

2. Method

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore how counselors at public universities support final-year students in becoming career-ready. This method was chosen because phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and how they make sense of those experiences in relation to a specific issue or challenge.

As stated by Moustakas (1994) and supported by Marshall and colleagues (2021), phenomenology does not just aim to describe what participants go through. It seeks to capture the deeper meaning behind those experiences. In this study, the goal was to listen closely to counselors' own stories and perspectives about their role in assisting students prepare to enter the workforce.

Six counselors from public institutions of higher education (PIHE) in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Perak were invited to take part in this study. These participants were selected through purposeful sampling technique, based on four specific criteria: (a) they were employed as a professional counselor or psychology officer, (b) they had experience working with final-year students, (c) they were based at a PHEI in one of the three mentioned states, and (d) they were willing to take part in the study.

Creswell and Poth (2024) highlighted that using criterion-based sampling is especially useful in phenomenological research, as it ensures that every participant has directly encountered the experience being studied. In this case, they have firsthand experience working with final year students on career-related issues.

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the counselors who participated in this study, highlighting key elements of their educational and professional backgrounds. All participants were females except one. Their age ranges from 27 to 52 years. Regarding educational qualifications, one counselor held a bachelor's degree, while the rest had earned master's degrees. Professionally, all participants were employed as counselors in public institutions of higher education (PIHE), with work experience varying from 2 to 20 years.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Participants

Pseudonym	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Age	35	52	40	27	28	29
State	Kuala Lumpur	Perak	Kuala Lumpur	Selangor	Selangor	Selangor
Level of Education	Master's degree	Master's degree	Master's degree	Master's degree	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree
Years of Experiences	9	20	16	3	2	4

The participant recruitment process involved two main steps. Initially, the researchers browse participants' university websites. Then, emails were sent to potential participants, followed by phone calls to arrange interview appointments with those who expressed interest. Data collection was conducted virtually through Google Meet, using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Each session lasted between one and two hours. Prior to the main interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with a counselor from a public university in the East Coast region, which helped refine the interview questions for clarity and relevance.

All interviews were video recorded and later transcribed by the researchers, following the procedures outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2022). Immediately after each interview, analytic memos were written to document reflections, emerging themes, and initial interpretations, consistent with the guidelines of Bogdan and Biklen (2007). Transcribing the interviews themselves allowed the researchers to remain closely engaged with the data and enable continuous analytic reflection through memo writing.

From the transcriptions, significant statements and quotes were identified to capture insights into the participants' experiences of enhancing career readiness among final year students. Then, these statements were grouped into thematic clusters, which formed the basis for a narrative account of the participants' experiences. Finally, a composite description was developed to capture the essence of the phenomenon, emphasizing shared elements of the participants' experiences. The entire process of data analysis was guided by the phenomenological approach outlined by Moustakas (1994).

3. Findings

Participants in the study employed five strategies in fostering career readiness among final year students. The strategies are discussed below:

3.1. Organizing Programs and Workshops

Some universities make it compulsory for graduating students to attend annual programs such as resume writing workshops and job interview workshops organized by university counselors. It is important for the students to gain knowledge on effective resume writing, as lots of companies use Applicant Tracking System (ATS) in screening candidates' resumes. The companies' top management will reject resumes that do not fulfill ATS requirements. By joining interview workshops, they learn important interview tips such as grooming and personal branding. Furthermore, they are more confident in entering the job market after participating in the workshops. C1 and C2 shared:

> "*We do provide programs, mandatory programs at the faculty level that are conducted every year. Among them are workshops… We call them workshops, which include interview tips, proper resume writing, and where the resume must be written correctly. Nowadays, many industries use the ATS (Applicant Tracking System). If the resume doesn't pass the ATS, sometimes companies won't even look at it if it's not detected by the system. So, students need to be*

aware of this. Through the workshops they attend, they learn important things like this, such as grooming and personal branding."

"Secondly, it's about the workshops. Organize workshops related to resume writing, job interviews, and so on. When these kinds of sessions are held, students understand better and become more confident."

Other than organizing workshops on resume writing and job interviews, the counselors also conduct career exhibitions. The main objective of conducting the exhibition is to expose students to available jobs in the labor market. C3 stated:

"And next is another strategy, for example, career exhibitions. When students attend and get exposed, they say: 'Oh, there are these positions here, and these opportunities over there'. It helps them improve their career strategies. That's how it works."

Moreover, the counselors organized practical and experiential programs such as interview simulations and resume reviews by industry professionals. By joining these programs, graduating students will gain a clear understanding of the expectations of a real work setting. C4 discussed:

"One effective strategy is implementing practical and experiential programs and not just organizing talks or workshops, but something that students can experience firsthand. For example, simulation of interview sessions that closely resemble real interviews, or resume writing exercises that are reviewed directly by industry professionals. When students experience it themselves, they feel... they understand more clearly the real expectations of the working world."

Furthermore, successful alumni from various fields are invited by the counselors to share their experiences. Among the experiences shared by the alumni are challenges that they faced, how they started their career journey, and mistakes that they made throughout their career development. Listening to the lived experiences will inspire and motivate final year students for career readiness. C5 and C6 emphasized:

"We invited alumni who have succeeded in their respective careers to come and share their real-life experiences, such as the challenges they faced, how they started from the bottom, and the mistakes they made. When students listen to 'real people', especially those who were once in their shoes, it becomes both inspiring and eye-opening."

"Another strategy is inviting alumni. These university alumni come to share their experiences with students to help boost their motivation in preparing for their careers."

3.2. Collaborating with Industry

Counselors in this study collaborated with industry professionals by inviting them to share their expectations for fresh graduates. They gave feedback on students' weaknesses, such as a lack of confidence in communication. Thus, programs and workshops are conducted to improve their weaknesses, such as public speaking workshops and mock interviews. C1 and C2 explained:

> *"We invited companies from the industry to share what they're really looking for. This way, they can explain what they expect from fresh graduates. From there, we designed small-scale programs. For example, we've had many engagements with companies, and some of them said, 'Okay, I think the students can speak English, but they lack the confidence to speak.' So, we organized public speaking workshops, for instance. We taught them how to speak effectively and how to attend interviews. These are the kinds of programs we run as part of our strategy.*

> *"Since we already have engagement with companies, when we gathered data like that, we developed programs based on what our students need... Based on our own observations and also on what companies have shared with us."*

Industry professionals also shared tips on how to prepare a good resume, tips for a successful job interview, and what should not be done by candidates during interview sessions. Thus, final year students will gain valuable knowledge on preparation for job interviews. C3 clarified:

> *"In that setting, we invited industry professionals to share what they want from graduates. They taught how to write a resume, and they also pointed out what turns them off... The common mistakes students make during interviews. So those things are valuable knowledge. That's where you gain that knowledge. You need to understand. If you go to an interview with zero knowledge and you don't get the job, don't be discouraged."*

Furthermore, representatives from industry shared how to prepare a resume, how to nail a job interview, and how to interact with them at career fairs. During mega interviews, they interviewed candidates for a job vacancy. C4 described:

> *"We invited companies to share job hunting skills, such as how to write a resume, how to attend interviews, and how to talk to companies during a career fair. That's basically it. Then, we also organize a 'Mega Interview Day', which means we invite companies solely for the purpose of conducting interviews."*

Other than collaborating with industry in career fairs and mega interviews, counselors in this study collaborated with recruiters in organizing a forum. The forum speakers are the top management of companies. Among the companies involved are SLB, Honda, PwC, KPBG, CIMB, Pos Malaysia, and PayNet. In addition, C5 highlighted:

"Then, we had a forum with recruiters who hold high-level positions, to discuss what companies are looking for in graduates. These were large, well-known companies. For example, we invited representatives from SLB, Honda, and PwC. For accounting firms, we had KPMG. We also invited companies from the banking sector, like CIMB, as well as Pos Malaysia and PayNet. We invited a wide range of companies. In total, around 25 companies participated in the recent 4-day 'Fly High' program."

3.3. Designing Career Modules

Counselors in this study designed career modules that cover all aspects related to career preparation, such as resume writing, personality types and career choices, grooming, cover letter writing, and interview preparation. Therefore, students will be exposed to suitable careers and the world of work. C6 explained:

"There is a career development module. This module teaches everything from A to Z related to careers, such as how to write a resume, understanding your personality, and which personality types are suitable for which types of jobs. Things like that. What else… Resume writing, grooming, such as what to wear, what not to wear. Then, everything else, such as cover letters and all related topics. Mock interviews, what kind of things you should say during an interview, and how to answer certain types of questions. So, this career development module provides students with exposure and understanding about careers and the working world."

The career module is structured for all university students from year one to year four. Each module has specific objectives and aims to be achieved. For first-year students, My Next Profiling consists of three components, which are their career interest, personality type, and career competency. The three components will be matched with vacancies available in companies for internship placement. C1 described:

"Here, we have something called the Career Structured Module or Career Structured Programs. We design it according to the year of study… First year, second year, third year, and fourth year. We target specific programs for first-year students, others for second year, third year, and so on. For first-year students, we have a profiling tool called My NeXT Profiling developed by Talent Corp. In this profiling, there are elements like career interests, personality, and competencies. Then, it will match these with available job vacancies listed in the system. And specifically, it focuses on internships. So, it will match students with companies based on what kind of candidates the companies are looking for. Using the personality results, the system will do the matchmaking."

3.4. Conducting Group Counselling Sessions

Group counseling sessions play a significant role in fostering career readiness among university students by providing a supportive and interactive environment where they can explore their career goals, challenges, and strategies for success. These sessions offer a platform for students to share experiences, ask questions, and receive feedback not just from a counselor, but also from peers who may be facing similar concerns. This collective approach encourages self-reflection, builds confidence, and reduces the sense of isolation often experienced during the career decision-making process. The group counseling sessions are conducted for third-year students. The objectives are to assist students in preparing resumes, attending interviews, identifying career interests and competencies, and searching for suitable companies for internship training. C2 said:

> *"We conduct group counselling sessions. During those sessions, we review their resumes, explore their interests, and assess their competencies. We guide them on how to find companies that suit them, how to prepare their resumes, how to attend interviews, and so on. This is done during their third year because they're about to go for their internships, right? They're preparing to join companies for internship placements. That stage also plays an important role."*

3.5. Providing Individual Coaching

Individual coaching plays a vital role in fostering career readiness among university students by offering personalized and goal-oriented guidance that helps them navigate their unique career paths with confidence and clarity. Unlike group sessions, individual coaching focuses solely on the student's personal goals, strengths, challenges, and aspirations, allowing for a deeper and more targeted approach to career development. Some students need one-on-one guidance from career counselors, such as those who are shy to ask questions during mass programs. Individual coaching helps them to be open, ask specific questions, and identify a career that suits them. Those who are confused about their future career also need individual coaching. By identifying their interests, values, and abilities, they are clearer on their future career. C3 stated:

> *"Another strategy is individual mentoring or coaching. Sometimes, students feel shy to ask questions in mass programs. So, personal sessions help them to be open, ask specific questions, and identify fields that suit them. I've personally mentored several students who were initially very confused about their direction. But once we sat down to discuss and analyze their interests, values, and potential, they became clearer and more motivated. I believe student-centered strategies like this are extremely important."*

4. Discussion

As indicated by the findings, counselors in this study applied five strategies in fostering career readiness among final year students. This section offers potential explanations for using the five strategies.

All six counselors organized career programs and designed career modules for students in their respective institutions. The programs offer numerous benefits to university students by preparing them for the transition from academic life to the professional world. Among the benefits of career readiness programs are exposing students to various types of careers, developing soft skills, illustrating practical steps in preparing for careers, and offering support for professional relationships (Detgen et al., 2021). Previous studies indicate that greater participation in career guidance activities was significantly associated with increased career readiness, higher productivity, and career adaptability resources among university students (Dodd et al., 2022; Green et al., 2020). Meanwhile, career modules play a critical role in fostering career readiness by equipping students with the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to transition effectively from university to the workforce. Study results demonstrated that implementing the Career Readiness Module among university students prior to graduation improved their career self-efficacy (Yusoff et al., 2024).

The university counselors play a pivotal role in enhancing students' career readiness by strategically collaborating with industry. Among practical ways of structuring this collaboration are industry-aligned career development programs, career talks, company-led career fairs, and recruitment. Study findings reveal a significant improvement in students' employability skills and job readiness due to collaboration between universities and industries (Al-Atroush & Ibrahim, 2022; Naseer et al., 2025).

By conducting group counseling, the counselors provide students with peer support, professional guidance, and structured activities that contribute to greater clarity and decision-making confidence. Study findings revealed that career intervention components and working alliance in group counseling resolve career indecision (Milot-Lapointe et al., 2019) and increase career confidence (Xie et al., 2023). Meanwhile, through career coaching, counselors in this study offer a wide range of benefits in enhancing university students' career readiness. Among the key benefits of career coaching are reducing students' career decision-making stress and increasing their career decision-making self-efficacy (Fris et al., 2025; van der Baan et al., 2024). Furthermore, career coaching enhances students' career-goal clarity and career choice certainty (Ebner, 2021; Lancer & Eatough, 2018).

5. Conclusion

Counselors in this study employed various strategies in assisting final year students to enhance their career readiness. Prior to this study, little was understood about their efforts in fostering career readiness among final year students. The findings revealed a diverse range of strategies such as organizing programs and workshops, collaborating with industry, designing career modules, conducting group counselling sessions, and providing individual coaching. This study suggested that enhanced support from faculty members and university stakeholders could assist in enhancing students' participation in career readiness programs organized by university counselors. Indeed, the involvement of all parties is crucial in increasing graduate employability in the Malaysian labor market.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants agreed to be involved in this study.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest

Ethics Statement

This study has been approved by the International Islamic University Malaysia Research Ethics Committee (IREC).

Author Contributions

The first author wrote this article. The second and third authors gave feedback on the article content and amended several points. The fourth author provided guidance in data analysis.

Data Availability Statement

Data that support the study findings are available and securely kept by the corresponding author.

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