

## Strategies in Enhancing the Employability of Fresh Graduates in the Malaysian Construction Industry During Pandemic Outbreak

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### Abstract

The construction sector plays a dominant role in providing job opportunities not only for the construction sector but also for other related sectors directly around the world. Abruptly, during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the construction industry has to limit their activities, causing workers from professional to site labour and other related workers to lose their work in the industry. The estimated unemployment rate is very worrying among fresh graduates and students about to graduate from construction-related programs as there is no way construction can be done virtually. Therefore, the aim of this study is to suggest strategies in enhancing the employability among fresh graduates in the Malaysian construction industry during the pandemic outbreak. Questionnaire survey were distributed to 217 respondents with 73% of questionnaire returned rate. The results were analysed using SPSS descriptive analysis. Based on the analysis, respondent agreed that the main strategies were to enhance the soft skills set, followed by graduates' attributes such as willingness to learn, undergo training, and have a mental readiness mindset as strategies to get employment during the hardest time and lastly improving curriculum design also has been determined as strategies that contributed to the employability of fresh graduates.

**Keywords:** Construction Industry, Employability, Fresh Graduates, Strategies, Pandemic Outbreak

**Research Background**

The construction industry is segmented and fragmented, affecting other sectors such as services, manufacturing, mining, and agriculture, contributing to national economic growth (Nawi et al., 2014). As we struggle with the U.S.-China Trade War, abruptly, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is attacking us that caused many deaths until many countries imposed a lockdown to control the spread of the virus suspended many of the economic activities (Diop, 2020). Due to reason, the construction industry all around the world lost its revenue. In Malaysia, the Government also declared Movement Control Order (MCO) as a prevention measure. To avoid a permanent impact on business and workers, the Malaysian Government introduced the stimulus package (Shah et al., 2020). As a result, business activity can resume; the labour market will recover faster, said BNM assistant governor Marzunisham Omar (Lim & The Edge Market, 2020). To compete in the labour market, fresh graduates should know the factor influencing demand on their employability in pandemic outbreaks while preparing themselves for a sustainable job in the future.

According to an employment analysis by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020a), the corona virus's economic and labour crisis could raise global unemployment by nearly 25 million. The ILO also anticipated that underemployment and labour poverty would increase significantly due to reduced working hours and wages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak worldwide. In terms of unemployment, Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) expects Malaysia's unemployment rate to be 4% from 3.3% in 2019 amid the COVID-19 virus outbreak. BNM assistant governor Marzunisham Omar said that the unemployment rate is the highest ever since the global financial crisis in 2009 and the Asian financial crisis in 1998 (Lim & The Edge Market, 2020). With the pandemic's presence, the construction industry had to limit their activities, causing workers from professional to site labour and other related workers to lose their working routine in the industry. They need to adopt the new working normal, as the alternative for this new era (Buheji & Buheji, 2020; Friedman, 2020). The estimated unemployment rate is very worrying among fresh graduates and students about to graduate from construction-related programs as there is no way construction can be done virtually. This is because some businesses had to restructure their workforce, which forces the retrenchment to survive in the new normal (Tay & Partners, 2020). Therefore, this study is intended to identify the strategies that contributed to the employability of fresh graduates in the Malaysian construction industry.

**Literature Review**

In most of the research, it found that graduates must be competent or in another word they must meet the expectation of employer in term of knowledge, skills and attitudes as a strategy to combat unemployment issue among fresh graduates. Along with this suggestion, Bahrim et al (2019) that graduates must improve their skills especially soft skills and communication skills as it is a significant skill claimed by the occupation providers instead of focusing on only a good grade during the study to be competent. Fraser et al (2019) in their study stated that the knowledge, skills and attitudes must be parallel to create graduates that meet the industry standards. Römgens et al (2019) also categorised the competency of an employee as measured through knowledge, skills and abilities in carrying out their work to have a sustainable career. Meanwhile, after COVID-19, Hite and McDonald (2020) asserted the turbulence of economic condition might have reduced the employment chances but with

the skills and positive attitudes, one might be able to adapt to the situation which will be enhancing the employment ability in the job market. The other researcher stated that the employment competency has changed as a result of the pandemic, but graduates can be ready with the job-related input, the transferable skills as employer prefer this kind of individual during recruitment. The employer believed that this type of individual has better resilience over the current condition and would be able to customize their way of work based on a situation (Buheji and Buheji, 2020). Rahman et al (2020) pointed that the graduates' unemployment during the COVID-19 outbreak can be reduced by equipping themselves with skills, knowledge and persistence attitudes that are demanded now.

Furthermore, Farhadi et al (2020) in their study found that engineering knowledge must be updated as it is required in the job market. Towards Industry Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), Mashood et al (2020) claimed that the digital knowledge in the Malaysian construction industry must be improved to meet the demand for the latest practices. Therefore, Kadir et al (2020) stated that job opportunities are subject to increase with the increase of knowledge and employability skills among fresh graduates. With the arises of employability issue during the virus pandemic, most of the literature supported that universities should improve their learning, teaching and assessment project to fit the current turbulence of the COVID-19 situation (Bahrim et al., 2019; Romgens et al., 2019; Abelha et al., 2020; Buheji and Buheji, 2020; Rahman et al., 2020; Farhadi et al., 2020; Moshood et al., 2020; Kadir et al., 2020). Besides, Romgens et al (2019) stated that the quality of education is measured through the curriculum provided by the school to amplify the students' employability. Meanwhile, Bahrim et al (2019) mentioned that the government should focus on vocational education to lessen the skill mismatch in the Malaysian labour market as vocational education prepared their student for a working environment. However, Abelha et al (2020) suggest that the competencies of graduates can be developed through the syllabus arrangement introduced by the universities.

In the case of a pandemic, Buheji and Buheji (2020) suggested that modification of the curriculum that focuses on specific assignment able will assist graduates to market themselves during emergencies. Rahman et al (2020) also stated that student should investigate the viability of the course in future before deciding to enrol as the university seemed to fail to prepare the knowledge demanded by the industry resulting in graduates must find the extra knowledge themselves. Due to this reason, Farhadi et al (2020) revealed that the syllabus in higher education must be evaluated again to make sure it fit the demand. Additionally, Kadir et al (2020) emphasised the importance of restructuring the educational system in term of subjects, skills and moral as it provides good attributes in intensifying the opportunities in future employment. Therefore, the educational system should be polished up in preparing the quality graduates needed in the Malaysian construction industry (Moshood et al., 2020). At the same time, graduates are requested to be able to adapt to the changes of situations as a strategy to increase employability during the new normal. A study by Fraser et al (2019) convinced that graduates should be more flexible in adapting to whatever situation they are facing. Graduates expected to accept the challenges and find a way to recover from the weakness. By the aspect of resilience, the transferable skills deemed important to measure graduates' performance. In the context of competency, Abelha et al (2020) pointed out the readiness to work within a certain situation will improve the employability of graduates but will the job mismatch situation is getting severe.

The adaptation and persistence traits among graduates are considered important during a pandemic outbreak (Hite and McDonald, 2020; Buheji and Buheji, 2020). Apart from that, Kamaruddin et al (2020) revealed that university student ready to undergo their internship during the restriction mode period as they believe that they should familiarize themselves with the pandemic environment starting from now. Thus, the graduates are advised to adapting the changes in the national situation with their positive attributes in order to secure some job during the pandemic outbreak (Kadir et al., 2020). The graduates also asked to apply specific knowledge and skills to become more competitive in the uncertainty of COVID-19 economic condition (Romgens et al., 2019; Abelha et al., 2020; Hite and McDonald, 2020; Rahman et al., 2020; Farhadi et al., 2020; Moshood et al., 2020; Kadir et al., 2020).

Besides, considering the COVID-19 situation, many researchers believe that emotional intelligence skills as an important aspect to help graduates survive in the pandemic era. Equipped with this trait, it is believed that graduates will be able to cope with the pressure of the work while maintaining their psychological health (Bahrim et al., 2019). It is aligned with the study by Römngens et al (2019) stated that emotional intelligence skill is one of the requirements needed in the new normal as it promotes positive emotion to the graduates to strive against mental breakdown as a result of the turbulence of the economy. The employer also expected graduate to be mentally ready where emotional intelligence is found as the second important traits under transversal skills (Abelha et al., 2020). Therefore, Hite and McDonald (2020) argued the firms to assist their employees' emotion because of the increases in the role of professional and the fear of losing job during a pandemic. Yet, Buheji and Buheji (2020) revealed that the emotional intelligence skills previously ignore but now consider as a great help to the organization where the team will look after their teammates in order to support them against burnout and overstress condition. Kamaruddin et al (2020) found that psychological and moral support from colleagues is important in performing the work from home approach during the internship period as a student are not that familiar to work in such condition.

Furthermore, communication and teamwork skills are considered part of transversal skills stated by Abelha et al (2020) in order to increase the competencies of graduates that simultaneously open up more employment chances. Fraser et al (2019) stated that besides a positive attitude, communication skill and teamwork are strategies to enhancing the employability skill where it contributes to a better relationship as both traits connected one another. Apart from that, teamwork and communication are generic skills needed in enhancing networking in the workplace (Römngens et al., 2019). Hence, Kadir et al (2020) explained that the additional skill such as communication skills is part of employability skills needed towards the employment security. Meanwhile, Farhadi et al (2020) specified the English communication skills as a factor influencing the employability of graduate on a point of English in an international language that enables graduates to understand technical terms in brochure and instruction used in the construction field. Next, Buheji and Buheji (2020) stated that teamwork is a way to develop a community ready to overcome the challenges by introducing mentorship support to help new employees to be more dedicated to the new normal.

Proceed with the next strategy, the employers are expecting graduates to learn through training or indirectly willingly in order to fit in a company (Fraser et al., 2019; Hite and McDonald, 2020; Kamaruddin et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2020). Fraser et al (2019) defined willingness to learn as a graduate that eager to improve his skills and ready to learn new task and information by asking for guidance from others. Besides, Hite and McDonald mentioned that the innovation in the working process can be developed through direct or indirect training which subjects to sustainable employment. A study by Kamaruddin et al. (2020) stated that graduates in a new normal are the type of graduates that willing to learn despite difficulties during the internship period. Graduates also expected to learn several skills sets before attending recruitment in order to upgrade their skills to meet the current demand. Not only that, but some works of literature also stressing on designing a new curriculum that adapting pandemic situation as a strategy to enhance the quality of graduates during the pandemic outbreak. After that, Fraser et al (2019) suggesting fresh graduates mastering thinking skills as it reckons with the art of deciding by evaluating the problem and figure out the way out from a problem. Römgens et al (2019) also agreed that one of a major component of self-efficacy is having a positive thought towards the problem that launch lifelong learning as employability skills needed. Therefore, Abelha et al (2020) and Buheji and Buheji (2020) stated that problem-solving skills are needed in facing challenges in the working environment during the declining stake of the economy due to COVID-19.

Move on to the next strategy, the graduates suggested enhancing networking for better career competencies. The networking of part of career competencies as the ability to expand the network giving an advantage to graduates to pave their way in the career development (Romgens et al., 2019; Kamaruddin et al., 2020). Hite and McDonald (2020) also agreed that strong career networks are the strategy for a sustainable career during COVID-19. Meanwhile, Abelha et al (2020), Farhadi et al (2020); Moshood et al (2020) mentioning the need of strengthening the digital competencies as the world moving forwards to the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR4.0). Besides, innovation skills also consider as strategies to enhancing the employability of fresh graduates. A study by Fraser et al (2019) mentioned that innovation happened due to the ability of graduates to solve a problem and the innovation are happening during the process. Recent coronavirus outbreak has been realizing many people on the importance of innovative approaches in the current curriculum setting to develop graduates' employability (Abelha et al., 2020). Therefore, competencies employability proposed by Buheji and Buheji (2020) stated that the intense innovative approach as a mechanism for better employment opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, entrepreneurship skills considered the last choice to survive in unstable economic condition as the employment chances getting low. Fresh graduates are advised to generate their own business during the pandemic outbreak to avoid further unemployment (Rahman et al., 2020). The work-life balance for a healthy working environment also suggested by previous literature, which connected to the emotional intelligence skill in facing the problem (Romgens et al., 2019; Hite and McDonald, 2020). Other than that, Bahrim et al (2019); Hite and McDonald (2020) mentioned that government should take an action in enforcing training program after graduates and reducing the retirement period as an initiative to minimize the rate of unemployment among graduates. Meanwhile, Albelha et al (2020); Kadir et al (2020) stated that graduates must improve their technical skills during the

pandemic outbreak to assist them in carrying out their job smoothly. Besides, only Fraser et al (2019) mentioning good self-management as a strategy to securing a job. Lastly, Romgens et al (2019) mentioned that career development skills are needed to attract employers with the graduates' skills and abilities to obtain a job. Hence, from the literature review above, three (3) research variables were identified as the predictor for strategies in enhancing the employability of fresh graduates in the Malaysian construction industry during pandemic outbreak as discussed in the following analysis and discussion section.

### **Research Methodology**

Nonetheless, this research used a quantitative data approach. Therefore, quantitative data collected became primary during the research process. The process involved numerical data before analysing the data using SPSS version 27 from the respondent's questionnaire. The descriptive statistics and graphical analysis were used to connect the variables, and comparison shall be made during the analysis process. Hence, the questionnaire is prepared in a uniform structure based on a specific topic to produce valuable data. The five items Likert scale is used as a choice for the respondent to choose in the questionnaire. The Likert scale allows a respondent to choose an answer from 1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The sampling list is obtained from the list of consultants registered with Treasury Malaysia websites to get targeted employers. The overall population was chosen based on a consultant firm registered under the Ministry of Finance with a total of 1,451 registered architect, civil engineering and quantity surveying consultant firm in West Malaysia. The stratified random sampling method was used to get suitable respondent. Although there are many consulting firms, only Selangor was chosen as Selangor recorded the highest number of consultant firms in Malaysia with a total of 511 consultant firms. According to Krejcie & Morgan (1970), the sample size for a population of 511 is 217 respondents. Therefore, 21 respondents were chosen among the employers for this research. Meanwhile, Lindemann (2019) stated that the average response rate for the overall survey type in 2019 is 33% while for an email survey is 30%. However, the minimum response rate was set at 60% to make sure enough data received for successful research. As a result, this survey received 73% response rate equivalent to 159 respondents from 217 questionnaires distributed in this survey. Then, the data inserted in the SPSS 26.0 for analysing purposes while illuminating the result. The information gathered was analysed in the form of a table.

### **Analysis And Discussion**

The strategies in enhancing employability among fresh graduates in the Malaysian construction industry during the pandemic outbreak for this research divided into new normal working practices, employment prospects, and employer brand attributes. Each variable classified under strategies was analysed in the following section.

**Predictor 1: Soft Skills Set***Table 1**Summary of soft skills set*

No.	Descriptions	Mean	Perception level	Rank
A1.	I am expecting graduates with the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions in carrying out a duty.	4.14	Agree	7
A2.	I believe that digital skills are necessary for performing tasks during pandemic outbreaks.	4.23	Agree	6
A3.	I believe that graduates should strengthen their technical skills to allow innovation in performing tasks.	4.35	Agree	4
A4.	I am expecting a graduate that possesses communication and language skills.	4.42	Agree	3
A5.	I am expecting a graduate that possesses critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills.	4.47	Agree	2
A6.	I think career development skills are crucial to maximizing graduates' potential.	4.32	Agree	5
A7.	In my opinion, teamwork value is very important for a sustainable career.	4.55	Strongly agree	1
A8.	I believe entrepreneurial skills are important during pandemic outbreaks.	3.97	Agree	8

Table 1 showed the breakdown of fresh graduates' employment strategies during the pandemic season for soft skills set. The highest rank for soft skills set was 'In my opinion, teamwork value is very important for a sustainable career' (mean=4.55) whereby the only item fell under 'strongly agree' satisfaction level. Proceed with 'I am expecting a graduate that possesses critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills' (mean=4.47) and then 'I am expecting a graduate that possesses communication and language skills' (mean=4.42). Meanwhile, 'I believe that graduates should strengthen their technical skills to allow innovation in performing tasks' and 'I think career development skills are crucial to maximizing graduates' potential' showed a slight difference mean score at 4.35 and 4.32 respectively. The positive feedback on item 'I believe that digital skills are necessary for performing tasks during pandemic outbreaks' kept decline at 4.23 mean score and followed by 'I am expecting graduates with the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions in carrying out a duty' at 4.14 mean score. Then, 'I believe entrepreneurial skills are important during pandemic outbreaks' (mean=3.97) received the fewest positive responses among respondents but still grouped under 'agree' perception level.

## Predictor 2: Curriculum Design

Table 2

*Summary of Curriculum Design*

No.	Descriptions	Mean	Perception level	Rank
B1.	I believe that designing a new curriculum able to strengthen the capability of graduates in the COVID-19 pandemic.	4.10	Agree	2
B2.	I believe that the new curriculum should implement uncertainty as preparation during a difficult time.	4.06	Agree	3
B3.	I am confident that graduates can perform better if they apply the knowledge learned.	4.21	Agree	1

As presented in Table 2, there a few fresh graduates' employability challenges in Malaysian construction industry during the pandemic outbreak where items under this category showed only a slight difference in mean score. The main challenge for this category was 'I am confident that graduates can perform better if they apply the knowledge learned' (mean=4.21). Next, rank occupied by I believe that designing a new curriculum able to strengthen the capability of graduates in the COVID-19 pandemic (mean=4.10). Further analysis showed that 'I believe that the new curriculum should implement the uncertainty as preparation during a difficult time' has the least vote at 4.06 mean score.

## Predictor 3: Graduates Attributes

Table 3

*Summary of Graduate Attributes*

No.	Descriptions	Mean	Perception level	Rank
C1.	I think that graduates who are willing to learn from the bottom have higher chances in the job market.	4.37	Agree	1
C2.	I prefer graduates who are prepared to undergo training in my company.	4.19	Agree	3
C3.	I feel that fresh graduates who have mental readiness can perform well.	4.33	Agree	2

Based on Table 3, there was an analysis of graduate attributes for the employability challenges of fresh graduates. The results obtained from the analysis showed 'I think that graduates who are willing to learn from the bottom have higher chances in the job market' (mean=4.37) received the highest positive vote among all challenges. From the analysis, 'I feel that fresh graduates who have mental readiness can perform well' (mean=4.33) only had a slight difference with the first-ranked challenges of graduate's attributes section. Meanwhile, the third challenges fell under 'I prefer graduates who are prepared to undergo training in my company' with a mean score of 4.19. Overall, the respondents ranked all graduates' attributes component with 'agree' perception level.



## Strategies in Enhancing Employability among Fresh Graduates

Table 4

*Strategies in enhancing employability among fresh graduates*

No.	Categories	Mean	Perception level	Rank
A.	Soft skills set	4.40	Agree	1
B.	Curriculum Design	4.09	Agree	3
C.	Graduate attributes	4.36	Agree	2

Analysing from strategies breakdown for each of categories respectively, the mean score for the main category was identified. According to Table 4, the category of 'Soft skills set' (mean=4.40) took the first rank among other categories. Meanwhile, 'Graduate attributes' (mean=4.36) category became the second choice of the respondent with a slight difference mean score recorded. Lastly, the least vote category was 'Curriculum Design' at a mean score of 4.09. Overall, the strategies provided were applicable during the pandemic outbreak from the view of employers.

Nevertheless, the perception level of strategies analysed were rated at 'agree' level of agreement. The strategies found were arranged in declining manner starting with soft skills set, graduate attributes and curriculum design. The first-ranked strategies category recorded was soft skills set which has received the highest vote. Indeed, soft skill is a crucial strategy whereby 'In my opinion, teamwork value is very important for a sustainable career' earned most voted variable a placed under 'strongly agree' perception level in this research study. The other item listed under the soft skills set also obtained positive feedbacks from the respondent. This research was divided the soft skills element into eight related statements that highly corporate skills needed by the fresh graduates. The top three soft skills set found were teamwork, critical thinking, and communication skill. These findings were supported by (Fraser et al., 2019; Romgens et al., 2019; Abelha et al., 2020; Kadir et al., 2020). These authors lined out that teamwork and communication skill are the transverse skills that increase the competencies of graduates that simultaneously allowing more employment chances.

Proceeded with the second-ranked strategies category found was graduates attributes as the next impeccable suggestion category in enhancing the employability among fresh graduates in the Malaysian construction industry during the pandemic outbreak. The study was found that most of the respondent agreed with the variable sated which include the willingness to learn, undergo training and has mental readiness mindset as strategies to get employment during the hardest time. From these findings, several researchers; Fraser et al (2019); Hite and McDonald (2020); Kamaruddin et al (2020); Rahman et al (2020) agreed that willingness to learn from the bottom and ready to learn through training or indirectly practical training in the office were desirable as they can fit the demand of employers. Meanwhile, Römgens et al (2019); Abelha et al (2020) stated that the employer also expected graduate to be mentally ready as it promotes positive emotion that against mental breakdown in the uncertainty of the economy.

Next, curriculum design also has been determined as strategies that contributed to the employability of fresh graduates in Malaysian construction industry. This research study found that 'I am confident that graduates can perform better if they apply the knowledge learned' as the most voted statement under curriculum design. This shows how the way of

learning influence the ready-to-work graduates in Malaysia. It can be through the new curriculum design that more suitable to the current situation such as the COVID-19 situation or a learning scheme that teaches the student to handle difficult time. It is aligned with the finding by Buheji and Buheji (2020); Kadir et al (2020) suggested that modification of the curriculum that focuses on specific assignment would assist graduates in paving some way during emergencies through subjects, skills and moral approaches. Generally, the overall result of suggestions was received positive feedback from the respondents. Most of them agreed on the strategies provided were applicable during pandemic outbreak from the view of employers. The strategies findings of this research also have been supported from the previous literature review.

### **Conclusion**

The objective for this research paper had been achieved by rank of mean for each strategy categories listed. Thus, this can be concluded that strategies in enhancing employability among fresh graduates are soft skills set, graduate attributes and curriculum design accordingly. This research analysis revealed that soft skills are critical skills among fresh graduates to secure a job right after graduation. The result was consistent with the previous study, as mentioned by Fraser et al (2019) in their study stated that the knowledge, skills and attitudes must be parallel to create graduates that meet the industry standards while Römgens et al (2019) also categorised the competency of an employee as measured through knowledge, skills and abilities in carrying out their work to have a sustainable career. Abelha et al (2020), added that communication and teamwork skills are considered part of transversal skills to increase the competencies of graduates that simultaneously open more employment chances. Therefore, it convinces that the soft skills effectively increase the competencies of graduates to allow more employment opportunities. Generally, overall results of benefits in this research had received satisfying feedback where most of the respondents agreed on the strategies of fresh graduates' employability listed in this research. The strategies findings of this research also have been supported from the previous literature review. With the results obtained in this study, the influence of pandemic outbreak towards employability of fresh graduates in Malaysian construction industry is now successfully resolved from the perspective of employers. The significance of the study to the Malaysian construction industry are:

- To help fresher graduates market themselves in the Malaysian construction industry thus reducing the unemployment rate among graduates.
- To allow fresh graduates to strategize themselves to stay employed even in the uncertainty of the economic condition
- To establish more knowledge on the influence of pandemic outbreak on the employability of fresh graduates in Malaysian construction industry.

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