The Influence of Career Outcome Expectations and Career Interests on Career Readiness among Secondary School Students in Johor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the influence of career outcome expectations and career interest (RIASEC) on career readiness among Form Four secondary school students (N = 462) in Johor, Malaysia. A set of questionnaires was utilised as the research instrument, and data analysis was conducted using SPSS 29.0. Reliability analysis confirmed acceptable internal consistency. Descriptive results indicated that most students demonstrated a moderate level of career readiness (68%). Multiple regression analysis revealed that the combination of career outcome expectations and career interest accounted for 29.9% ($R^2 = 0.299$) of the variance in students' career readiness. Career outcome expectations emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .446$, $p < .05$), while Investigative ($\beta = .126$, $p < .05$) and Conventional ($\beta = .109$, $p < .05$) career interests also had significant positive effects. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening school-based career guidance and targeted interventions, while noting that the convenience sampling and cross-sectional design limit the generalizability of the results.

Keywords: career readiness, career interest, RIASEC, career outcome expectations, secondary school

INTRODUCTION

Careers play a significant role in human well-being by providing purpose, self-worth, financial stability, social connection and overall life satisfaction (Chang et al., 2023; Hamzah et al., 2022; Vieira et al., 2021). While career readiness has been widely examined among graduates and individuals entering the workforce, its importance among secondary school students has received less attention, as studies on this group often prioritise academic outcomes(Chen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024; Yousef, 2024).

Career readiness is defined as a set of diverse attitudes, behaviours, and abilities that enable individuals to navigate occupational tasks successfully, ensuring a smooth transition to the workforce (Wang et al., 2024). This includes engagement in career planning, exploration, decision-making, developing confidence, skills and competencies (Azhenov et al., 2023; Gustina et al., 2024; Tang, 2019). Individuals who demonstrate career readiness are typically empowered with financial literacy, self-efficacy, employability, networking skills and adaptability (Alfaiz et al., 2021; Moore & Thaller, 2023; Musa & Mat Rashid, 2020). Given the rapid technological shifts in today's labour market, preparing adolescents with such competencies has become vital (Shaari et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2021).

Global studies show that career readiness among adolescents remains inconsistent. For example, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report revealed that in 15 of 19 longitudinal studies, students who engaged in career planning during adolescence secured better future careers (OECD, 2024). Yet, many 15–16 year olds failed to state their potential job at age 30, signalling weak career planning. Similarly, research in Australia found that 59% of students aged 15–18 were unsure about their career choice (Gleeson & Walsh, 2023), while in Armenia, schools responded by implementing a structured 15 week career planning module (European Training Foundation, 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that many adolescents remain uncertain about their future careers, underscoring the importance of embedding career

readiness initiatives early in secondary education to enhance preparedness for post-secondary transitions and employability.

In Malaysia, most studies on career readiness have concentrated on university students and vocational college graduates (Mahmud, 2017; Musa & Mat Rashid, 2020; Yeop Kamarudin & Mohd Kosnin, 2022), leaving adolescents at the secondary school level relatively underexplored. In addition, previous Malaysian studies have tended to focus on fragmented aspects of career readiness such as career exploration (Nor Hazwani Halim & Sahid, 2020; Rong et al., 2024) and career choice (Abd. Karim & Mohd Rasdi, 2021; Ashari et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2023).

This study addresses this gap by examining career readiness among secondary school students within the Malaysian context, specifically in Johor, a rapidly developing industrial state (Amar et al., 2023). This is concerning given that Johor faces pressing issues related to adolescent employability. Abu Rahim et al. (2023) reported that the Southern Region recorded the highest percentage of undereducated youth (13.3%), while Johor had the highest proportion of individuals aged 15 to 19 already in employment (15.6%) as reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM, 2024). These figures raise concerns about premature workforce entry without adequate readiness. Since today's labour market requires at least post-secondary qualifications (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019), secondary school students must develop readiness not only for employability but also for successful transition to higher education (Agherdien, 2014; Villares & Brigman, 2019).

In line with this, Fajaryati et al. (2020) asserted that possessing essential skills and knowledge that align with local market demands will help residents contribute significantly to economic progression. The long-term implications of weak readiness are further supported by a study in Malaysia by Abu Rahim et al. (2023), which found that youth without tertiary education face significant challenges in securing jobs that match their skills and qualifications, even 100 months after completing secondary school. Consequently, their likelihood of being hired is less than 20%. The study also showed that students with early career readiness recognise the value of tertiary education in securing better employment, higher salaries and job satisfaction.

This study therefore aims to investigate the combined influence of career outcome expectations and RIASEC career interests on the overall career readiness of Form Four students in Johor. In doing so, it contributes new insights into adolescent career development and informs targeted interventions to prepare Malaysian youth for future educational and occupational pathways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career Interests and Career Readiness

Beyond the importance of career readiness itself, this study also examines two key predictors, career outcome expectations and career interests. Both are critical psychological factors that shape adolescents' career behaviours (Lent & Brown, 2006; Sheu et al., 2010)

Career interest refers to tendencies toward specific career characteristics (Pham et al., 2024) and plays an important role in career development (Lent & Brown, 2006). Holland et al. (1973) stated that career interest is expressed through personality traits related to occupation, hobbies and certain activities. These personality traits are categorised into six types known as RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional). Each category is described as follows:

1. Realistic: Occupations involving practical and physical activities (e.g. mechanic, carpenter, pilot and athlete)
2. Investigative: Occupations involving skills in mathematics and science, data analysis and exploration activities (e.g. data analyst, psychologist, researcher and scientist)
3. Artistic: Occupations involving creative activities, self-expression and imagination (e.g. dancer, architect, photographer and writer)
4. Social: Occupations involving helping others, becoming mediators and enjoying communication with others (e.g. counsellor, nurse, social worker and teacher)

5. Enterprising: Occupations involving leadership, delivering speeches, approaching others to influence and persuade (e.g. entrepreneur, lawyer, financial adviser and sales executive)
6. Conventional: Occupations involving data management and administration (e.g. accountant, administrator, logistics manager and office clerk)

Past research has consistently demonstrated a significant link between career interests and aspects of career readiness. For instance, Ajayi et al. (2023) in a study of 204 Grade 12 students in South Africa, found that Enterprising (β = .251, p = .003), Social (β = .123, p = .045), and Artistic (β = .170, p = .006) interests positively influenced career decision-making, with the overall model explaining 42.1% of the variance (Adjusted R^2 = .421). Extending beyond decision-making, Donnay and Borgen (1996) in their study of 18,951 employed adults across 50 occupational groups, showed that all six RIASEC themes significantly predicted occupational group membership, with Wilks's λ values ranging from .775 to .886 (all p < .00005). Multivariate analysis explained approximately 65% of the variance (Wilks's λ = .35) and achieved hit rates of 10–11%, nearly five times greater than chance. Similarly, in a longitudinal validity study by Hansen and Dik (2005) with 241 university alumni found strong evidence for the 12-year predictive validity of the Strong Interest Inventory, an instrument grounded in Holland's RIASEC themes. The results showed that 58% of participants' eventual occupations aligned with their initial interest assessments, a rate significantly higher than the 26% expected by chance. This predictive hit rate was more than double the chance expectation rate of 26%, a statistically significant difference (p < .001). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that RIASEC interests influence both immediate career decision-making and long-term occupational choice, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping career readiness across diverse educational and cultural contexts.

Career Outcome Expectations and Career Readiness

While career interests shape the domains toward which students are drawn, career outcome expectations influence how they evaluate the potential consequences of pursuing those domains. According to Bandura (1977), outcome expectations together with self-efficacy shape human behavior. Bandura (1986) further stated that outcome expectations arise from observations of situations and events in an individual's environment, as well as from the perceived consequences of actions taken. In career development, outcome expectations develop career goals, actions and processes along the career path (Lent et al., 2017), predict the effects of future career goals (Korkmaz & Yam, 2023) and influence their involvement in career-related tasks and choices (Abdul Karim et al., 2024).

Previous studies have confirmed the association between career outcome expectations and aspects of career readiness. A study by Qotimah and Wardani (2022) on 151 university students in Syaria Accounting in Indonesia found that career outcome expectations have a significant influence on career choice, (β = 0.374, p <.000). Another study by Caesarani et al. (2021) on 505 undergraduate students and professional dental students in Indonesia, revealed that career outcome expectations have a significant direct effect on career exploration, β=0.151 (p<.006). Wong et al. (2023) study on 318 public and private university students in Malaysia also found that career outcome expectations have a strong effect on career choice (β = 0.564, p <.01). These findings substantiate the significant impact of career outcome expectations on career readiness.

Research Gap and Hypotheses Development

Despite this evidence, several gaps remain in the Malaysian context. Most prior studies have examined outcome expectations and career interests separately or linked them only to specific aspects such as career choice (Ashari et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2023), rather than considering their combined influence on overall career readiness. For instance, Mohd Raime (2020) investigated the influence of career outcome expectations and career interests on career choice among accounting-major university students, but did not extend the analysis to overall career readiness. This highlights a critical gap in the literature, where the joint role of these psychological factors in predicting adolescents' career readiness remains underexplored, particularly in Johor, where early workforce entry and skill mismatches underscore the need for a more holistic understanding.

Based on the above literature review and identified research gaps, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Realistic career interest has a significant positive effect on career readiness.

H2: Investigative career interest has a significant positive effect on career readiness.

H3: Artistic career interest has a significant positive effect on career readiness.

H4: Social career interest has a significant positive effect on career readiness.

H5: Enterprising career interest has a significant positive effect on career readiness.

H6: Conventional career interest has a significant positive effect on career readiness.

H7: Career outcome expectations have a significant positive effect on career readiness.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative design. The population consisted of Form Four students (16 years old) from public secondary schools in Johor, with 462 respondents (male = 169, female = 293) selected using convenience sampling. This nonprobability technique involves selecting participants who are readily accessible and willing to take part in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that random sampling is often difficult or impossible to obtain, therefore, convenience sampling is frequently used with participants selected based on their accessibility and availability. The method was chosen because participation depended on schools that granted administrative approval and were logistically feasible for the researcher to access within the data-collection period. Although convenience sampling limits generalisability due to potential selection bias, it is practical and suitable for exploratory studies where access and feasibility are key considerations (Taherdoost et al., 2016).

The instrument used in this study was a Google Form online questionnaire which was divided into two main sections. Section A is the demographic information. Section B is the integration of three sets of questionnaires. First, the Student Career Readiness Index (SCRI) by Dodd et al. (2022) was used to evaluate the level of career readiness. SCRI is a 9-item questionnaire that uses a 6-point Likert scale measuring 0 (I don't know) to 5 (I completely agree). According to Dodd et al. (2022), testing on a sample of 1508 students demonstrated good factorability (KMO = 0.90) while subsequent testing on 2221 students confirmed the instrument's construct validity, with fit indices of CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.10. As the SCRI had not previously been applied in the Malaysian context, the instrument was translated into Malay to mitigate cross-cultural bias, given its Western origins.

Second, the Career Decision Making Outcome Expectancies Scale (CDMOES) by Betz and Voyten (1997) was used to evaluate the level of career outcome expectations. CDMOES is a 9-item questionnaire that uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). A study by Betz and Voyten (1997) reported that the CDMOES demonstrated high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from $\alpha = 0.77$ to 0.79. Subsequent local studies in Malaysia have also reported its reliability, with reported alpha coefficients of $\alpha = 0.85$ (Mohd Puad et al., 2023) and $\alpha = 0.85$ (Mohamed, 2022).

Third, the RIASEC Marker Scale by Armstrong et al. (2008) was used to evaluate the level of career interests by category (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional). RIASEC Marker Scale is a 48-item questionnaire that uses a 5-point Likert scale measuring 1 (Strongly dislike) to 5 (Strongly like). According to Armstrong et al. (2008), the RIASEC Marker Scale demonstrated convergent validity through its correlation with the General Occupational Themes from the Strong Interest Inventory, with coefficients ranging from 0.56 to 0.72 (mean, r = 0.64). The scale also exhibited high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from $\alpha = 0.79$ to 0.94, across all RIASEC dimensions in various sample groups. A more recent survey by Du et al. (2024), conducted across 57 countries including Malaysia, further confirmed the scale's reliability, reporting a mean Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = 0.85$.

Later, permission to distribute the questionnaire was obtained from the faculty and school authorities. Before

distributing the online questionnaire in Form Four WhatsApp groups, school counsellors were given instruction to handle the process. The data were collected from 14 to 20 January 2025 during the last week of the 2024/2025 semester and the first week of the year-end school holiday. No personal information was collected from respondents in order to keep the response as private and confidential. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 29.0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Reliability of Scales

The internal consistency reliability of the study variables was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). The Career Readiness scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.810 while the Career Outcome Expectations scale recorded reliability coefficient of 0.914. For the Career Interest scale, reliability values ranged from 0.743 to 0.934 across the six RIASEC dimensions. These results indicate that all scales demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency.

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the reliability of the instrument. Based on the methodological review by Bujang et al. (2024), a pilot study sample size of at least 30 respondents is usually adequate to estimate internal consistency and detect potential issues with questionnaire items. Accordingly, 37 students were included in the pilot testing to assess the internal consistency reliability of the scales before the full data collection.

Descriptive Results of Each Variable

In this section, descriptive analysis presents the frequency and percentage for the levels of career readiness, career interest (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional), and career outcome expectations.

Career Readiness

Table 1 shows the career readiness level among Form 4 students in Johor. The students are grouped into three level which is low (15.4%), moderate (68.0%) and high (16.7%). Overall, the majority of students fell into the moderate-level category, exhibiting moderate career readiness. These findings suggest that many students may thrive with additional support to enhance their career readiness.

Table 1 Career Readiness Level		
Level	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Low	71	15.4
Moderate	314	68.0
High	77	16.7
Total	462	100.0

Although the proportion of low-level students is small, Yousef (2024) asserted that low and moderate levels of career readiness create barriers in career paths as they hinder achievement and educational involvement, complicate the transition from secondary school to meeting market demands, restrict career-related competencies, weaken the ability to cope with challenges and impede the capacity to adapt to different work environments.The high percentage of moderate-level students may be due to several factors. First, at 16 years old, the students are in the phase of being adolescents. According to Super (1953), at this phase, students are actively involved in career exploration and begin to make career and educational decisions. Thus, students may still be shaping their career identities and paths. Chen et al. (2021) asserted that, high school students who engage in career exploration activities have a holistic understanding of their interest and strength, subsequently

influencing better career decision-making. In addition, the ability to make career decision led to nurturing self-confidence, hence creating self-awareness of future careers.

Second, career exploration is not limited to students alone. Parents, teachers and school counsellors play significant roles by providing students with appropriate support for career awareness (Mohd Norli & Abu Bakar, 2024). The long-term implication of understanding the demands of future market job that align with career interest enhances early awareness on relevant skills and knowledge needed to ensure employability (Yusran et al., 2021).

In conclusion, most Form Four students in Johor demonstrated a moderate level of career readiness, reflecting their ongoing phase of career exploration and decision-making. While this indicates some preparedness, the findings highlight the need for continuous support from parents, teachers, and school counsellors to strengthen students' career awareness and equip them with the skills required for future employability.

Career Interest (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional)

Table 2 presents the overall career interest levels of students across the six RIASEC dimensions. For the Realistic category, most students were at low (46.5%) or moderate (46.3%) levels, with only 7.1% at the high level, suggesting limited inclination toward Realistic-related occupations. In the Investigative dimension, 23.4% of students were at the low level, 50.4% at the moderate level, and 26.2% at the high level, indicating that many students showed moderate to high interest in Investigative-related occupations. For the Artistic dimension, the majority (57.8%) were at the moderate level, while 30.7% were at the low level and only 11.5% at the high level, reflecting limited preference for Artistic occupations.

In the Social category, most students demonstrated moderate (65.2%) or high (23.6%) interest, with only 11.3% at the low level, suggesting greater inclination toward Social-related occupations. Similarly, for the Enterprising dimension, most students were at the moderate level (64.3%), followed by 19.7% at low and 16.0% at high levels, indicating that strong preferences for Enterprising careers were less common. Finally, in the Conventional dimension, the majority of students (60.4%) were at the moderate level, with 22.3% at low and 17.3% at high levels, showing that students generally had a moderate but not dominant preference for Conventional-related careers.

When comparing across dimensions, a clear pattern emerges in which most students demonstrated moderate levels of career interest in five categories: Investigative (50.4%), Artistic (57.8%), Social (65.2%), Enterprising (64.3%), and Conventional (60.4%). This suggests that while students show some inclination toward these career interest categories, their preferences are not yet strongly developed. Exposing students to a wider range of occupation-based experiences may therefore help foster stronger career interests and align them with future opportunities.

Table 2 Career Interest (RIASEC) Level

	RIASEC Dimension	Low (f, %)	Moderate (f, %)	High (f, %)
1	Realistic	215 (46.5%)	214 (46.3%)	33 (7.1%)
2	Investigative	108 (23.4%)	233 (50.4%)	121 (26.2%)
3	Artistic	142 (30.7%)	267 (57.8%)	53 (11.5%)
4	Social	52 (11.3%)	301 (65.2%)	109 (23.6%)
5	Enterprising	91 (19.7%)	297 (64.3%)	74 (16.0%)
6	Conventional	103 (22.3%)	279 (60.4%)	80 (17.3%)

Shougee (2024), emphasised that awareness of job earnings is essential for high school students, as it allows them to align their career choices with financial goals. Since many students remain unaware of occupations beyond their immediate environment, this knowledge can enhance motivation and support effective career

planning. In addition, Elias et al. (2024) highlighted that aiming for financial stability is particularly important in the context of uncertain economic progress, helping students strive for secure futures.

Beyond career awareness, the provision of additional support through relevant skills and knowledge is equally critical. The World Economic Forum (2025) projected that by 2030, demand for skills in artificial intelligence (AI) and big data will rise by up to 97%, while the need for adaptability skills will increase by 78%. With traditional roles being reshaped by automation and restructuring, lifelong learning and adaptability become essential. Idris and Bacotang (2023) further noted that combining human-centred solutions with advanced technologies enables students to better navigate diverse work environments.

Career counselling also plays a vital role in guiding students toward meaningful career pathways. Kurniawati et al. (2023) found that counselling helps students identify career preferences, develop career identities, and achieve better career well-being. Similarly, Puebla (2022) argued that poor career choices among adolescents often result from a lack of proper guidance from social environments, highlighting the importance of structured counselling in shaping youth career decisions.

In summary, the descriptive results show that most students demonstrated moderate levels of interest across the RIASEC dimensions, with particularly stronger inclinations toward Investigative and Social categories. These patterns suggest that while students are exploring a range of occupational characteristics, their interests are not yet strongly established. Therefore, strengthening career guidance, counselling, and skills-based exposure is essential to help students develop clearer career preferences and better align with future workforce demands.

Career Outcome Expectations

Table 3 shows career outcome expectations level. From the overall sample, 65 students (14.1%) are at the low level, 278 students (60.2%) are at the moderate level and 119 students (25.8%) are at the high level. The noteworthy proportion at the moderate level indicates that this group of students has balanced expectations about their career-related actions. This finding implies that majority of the students neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic about future career.

Table 3 Career Outcome Expectations Level		
Level	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Low	65	14.1
Moderate	278	60.2
High	119	25.8
Total	462	100.0

Adolescence is a phase when students are determining and exploring their identity. According to Branje et al. (2021), before adopting a possible identity, adolescents consider their childhood identifications, such as hobbies, interests and values as these former identifications shape their career choices. During this process of exploration, the expectation of a future career is
based on their current self-understanding and reality of the abilities they have. Thus, it is possible that a higher percentage of students demonstrate a moderate level of career outcome expectations.

Batool and Ghayas (2020) stressed that during adolescence, gaining identity achievement is crucial as career identity is one of the most important aspects of adolescence during this timeframe. They added that a well-developed career identity not only strengthens career outcome expectations but also provides economic benefits and personal fulfillment.

In conclusion, most students demonstrated moderate levels of career outcome expectations, reflecting a balanced outlook toward their future careers. This suggests that while they are in the process of exploring and shaping their identities, their expectations are grounded in self-understanding and developing abilities. Strengthening

career identity formation during adolescence is therefore vital to enhance realistic and positive career expectations that can support long-term personal and professional growth.

Regression Analysis to Determine Predictors of Career Readiness

Table 4 presents the multiple regression results for predictors of career readiness. This analysis also serves as the hypothesis testing by identifying which factors significantly influence students' preparedness for future career pathways. Regression assumptions were met, with residuals showing approximate normality and no evidence of severe multicollinearity (all VIF values < 5) (Hair et al., 2021; Mishra et al., 2019).

Table 4 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis for Predictors of Career Readiness

	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
1	R	.047	.048	.042	.979	.328	.825	1.212
2	I	.132	.048	.126	2.752	.006*	.731	1.368
3	A	.092	.054	.076	1.688	.092	.754	1.325
4	S	.004	.062	.003	.059	.953	.663	1.509
5	E	-.050	.061	-.041	-.826	.409	.618	1.619
6	C	.125	.054	.109	2.323	.021*	.698	1.432
7	COE	.714	.065	.446	10.943	<.001*	.930	1.076

Note. R = .547, R^2 = .299, F = (7, 454) = 27.666. Significance level, * p<.05. R= Realistic, I = Investigative, A =Artistic, S = Social, E = Enterprising, C = Conventional, COE = Career Outcome Expectations

The regression model was significant, R = .547, R^2 = .299, adjusted R^2 = .289, F (7, 454) = 27.67, p < .05, indicating that career outcome expectations and career interests together explained 29.9% of the variance in career readiness. The effect size was large, f^2 = 0.43 (Cohen, 1988). Among the predictors, career outcome expectations emerged as the strongest predictor (β = .446, p < .05), thus supporting H7. These findings are in line with previous study by Caesarani et al. (2021), Pratiwi et al. (2020), Qotimah and Wardani (2022) and Wong et al. (2023). This finding highlights the crucial role of outcome expectations, as Li et al. (2024) stated that an individual's career trajectory is shaped by beliefs about the consequences of their career actions. Supporting this, Lent and Brown (1996) explained that the combination of outcome expectations and interests, together with self-efficacy, galvanises individuals to pursue particular careers. Consistent with this, Lent et al. (1994) in Social Cognitive Career Theory asserted that when individuals believe in what they can achieve and expect from their career choice, outcome expectations drive actions through interest. This process influences readiness toward career choice, as those who expect positive outcomes (e.g. career satisfaction, achievement), will be motivated to participate in activities that enhance career readiness (Pratiwi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, both Investigative (β = .126, p < .05) and Conventional (β = .109, p < .05) significantly predicted career readiness, thereby supporting H2 and H6. In contrast, the remaining four dimensions, Realistic, Artistic, Social and Enterprising were not significant predictors, and thus H1, H3, H4, and H5 were not supported. These results contradict Ajayi et al. (2023), who found that Enterprising, Social and Artistic interests positively influenced career decision-making among South African students. They also differ from Donnay and Borgen (1996) and Hansen and Dik (2005), both of whom reported that all RIASEC dimensions significantly predicted career choice. A possible explanation for these inconsistencies lies in contextual and developmental factors. In the Malaysian secondary school context, Realistic and Enterprising pathways may require practical exposure or entrepreneurial readiness that students have yet to acquire, while Artistic and Social interests may be less emphasised in the education system, reducing their salience for readiness. This contradiction highlights that while prior studies established the predictive value of all RIASEC dimensions for career choice, only certain dimensions, particularly Investigative and Conventional, appear to translate into overall career readiness within the present context. The significant contribution of Investigative and Conventional interests suggests that

students with these traits are more likely to participate in activities related to their preferred fields, thereby strengthening their career readiness. As Jones et al. (2021) noted, individuals with specific career interests prioritise relevant activities, environments and outcomes by allocating more time and effort toward achieving their goals. Similarly, Pham et al. (2024) emphasised that such individuals gather career-related information, understand their traits, plan and evaluate strategies and actively prepare for future opportunities, processes that directly contribute to heightened career readiness.

In conclusion, the regression analysis demonstrates that career outcome expectations are the strongest predictor of career readiness, while Investigative and Conventional career interests also play significant roles. These results underline the importance of fostering positive outcome expectations and supporting students in developing specific career interests to strengthen their preparedness for future educational and occupational pathways.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study demonstrated that Form Four students in Johor largely exhibit a moderate level of career readiness, with career outcome expectations emerging as the strongest predictor, followed by Investigative and Conventional career interests. These results underscore the importance of nurturing positive career aspirations and aligning students' interests with realistic opportunities in Malaysia's evolving educational and labour landscape.

At the same time, the non-significant effects of Realistic, Artistic, Social and Enterprising interests point to limited exposure and cultural preferences for secure professions, highlighting the need to broaden career guidance beyond conventional pathways. Policies and interventions at the state and school levels should focus on equipping students with adaptable skills, expanding awareness of diverse career options and integrating targeted guidance programmes.

Several limitations should be noted. The use of convenience sampling restricts generalisability, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias and the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions. These findings, while meaningful, are specific to Johor's socioeconomic context and may not fully represent other regions.

Future research should therefore employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, extend to diverse geographic and socioeconomic settings and incorporate additional psychosocial and environmental predictors such as career self-efficacy, parental support, teacher expectations and socioeconomic background. In particular, this study did not distinguish between STEM-stream and non-STEM students. Given Malaysia's national emphasis on building a strong STEM pipeline, further studies should specifically investigate career readiness among STEM-stream students, who may face distinct challenges in aligning their interests and outcome expectations with science and technology-based career pathways. Such efforts will provide a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent career readiness and strengthen evidence-based strategies for preparing Malaysian youth for an increasingly technology-driven labour market.

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