

Dreams Vs Reality Phenomenological Journey of Fresh Graduates Seeking Employment in Competitive Industry

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ABSTRACT

The transition from graduation to employment represents a pivotal phase in a fresh graduate's life, often accompanied by a striking contrast between personal aspirations and the realities of the labor market. This study explores the phenomenological journey of fresh graduates as they enter highly competitive industries, focusing on the discrepancies between their career expectations and the practical challenges they encounter. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research captures the lived experiences of graduates who are actively navigating the job market, shedding light on their struggles, perceptions, and adaptive strategies. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with individuals from diverse fields, allowing for an in-depth exploration of common themes such as job search difficulties, employer expectations, and industry competition. The findings reveal that lack of professional experience, skills mismatches, and oversaturated markets serve as critical barriers to successful employment. In contrast, networking opportunities, continuous upskilling, resilience, and adaptability emerged as essential strategies for managing these obstacles. Furthermore, participants expressed varying perspectives on the adequacy of tertiary education in preparing them for real-world professional demands, pointing to gaps between theoretical training and practical application. The study underscores the pressing need for enhanced career readiness programs within educational institutions and more inclusive, skill-oriented hiring practices in industries, ultimately bridging the gap between graduate expectations and employment realities.

Keywords: Fresh Graduates, Employment Challenges, Job Search Strategies, Competitive Industries.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from college to the workforce is a significant phase for fresh graduates, but many face challenges in securing employment, especially in competitive industries where job opportunities are limited. This study explores the disparity between fresh graduates' career expectations and the realities they encounter in the job market. It examines the various difficulties they face, the strategies they use in job applications, and how their tertiary education influences their employment journey. By understanding these factors, the study aims to provide insights into how educational institutions, employers, and policymakers can better support fresh graduates in their employment transition.

As industries become increasingly competitive, companies now seek candidates with not only strong academic backgrounds but also practical experience, specialized skills, and adaptability to workplace demands. However, many fresh graduates enter the job market unprepared for these expectations, leading to high rejection rates and difficulty in securing stable employment. This gap between education and employment raises concerns about the effectiveness of current academic programs, career guidance services, and internship opportunities provided by educational institutions. Through a phenomenological approach, this study aims to explore the real-life

struggles and aspirations of fresh graduates, providing valuable insights into how they navigate the challenges of finding employment in a highly competitive job market.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to understand the employment journey of fresh graduates by examining the challenges they face, the strategies they use, and their perspectives on the role of tertiary education in job searching. Specially this study aimed to:

1. Explore the issue of challenges face by fresh graduates on job searching.
2. Identify job search strategies used by fresh graduates in apply for a job.
3. To explore fresh graduates' perspective on the effect of tertiary education on fresh graduate's job searching.

Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on fresh graduates who are actively seeking employment in competitive industries. It investigates the challenges they face, the strategies they use, and their perspectives on how tertiary education has prepared them for the workforce. The study is conducted in Valencia City, Bukidnon, and only includes graduates from the past one to two years who are currently unemployed or still searching for jobs. It does not include individuals who have secured stable employment, those pursuing further studies, or graduates working in industries unrelated to their academic background. The study is also limited to qualitative data collection and does not analyze numerical employment rates or broader economic factors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design, which aims to understand the lived experiences of fresh graduates seeking employment. Through individual semi-structured interviews and job search journals, the research gathers detailed personal insights on job-seeking challenges, expectations vs. reality, and strategies used by graduates in competitive industries.

Research Instrument

The study uses a semi-structured interview questionnaire, designed to allow flexibility while maintaining consistency in data collection. The interview questions focus on graduates' challenges, job search strategies, and perceptions of tertiary education's role in their employment journey. To ensure credibility, the questionnaire was validated by industry experts, including HR professionals, career counselors, and academic researchers. Participants were also asked to maintain job search journals, documenting their experiences, emotional responses, and reflections on the job search process over a given period.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Valencia City, Bukidnon, a fast-growing economic hub in Northern Mindanao. With several universities and colleges producing fresh graduates each year, the city serves as a suitable setting for studying the employment challenges of newly graduated individuals.

Participants and Sampling

Participants included fresh graduates actively seeking employment within competitive industries. The study used purposive sampling, selecting graduates who met the criteria of being unemployed or actively searching for jobs during the research period. Participants came from different academic backgrounds to ensure a diverse range of experiences and insights.

Data Gathering Procedures

The data collection process involved conducting individual interviews with fresh graduates to gather firsthand insights into their job search experiences. Participants were also asked to maintain job search journals to document their emotions, reflections, and strategies over time. The responses were validated through expert-reviewed interview questions to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted to identify common patterns and recurring themes in participants' responses. This method allowed researchers to categorize data into key areas, such as employment struggles, job search strategies, and perceptions of tertiary education. The findings were then interpreted to develop a comprehensive understanding of fresh graduates' employment realities.

Challenges Faced by Fresh Graduates in Job Searching

Fresh graduates often face difficulties in finding employment due to limited experience, high competition, and mismatched skills. These challenges highlight the gap between academic preparation and the demands of the labor market, making the job search a stressful and uncertain process

Emerging theme 1: Rejection Due to Lack of Experience

Fresh graduates highlight that experience is requirement employers often prefer candidates with prior work experience, making it difficult for fresh graduates to secure jobs.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P6: "I applied for an entry-level position, believing that my education and skills would be enough, but the employer preferred someone with prior work experience"

P9: "Even though I had relevant internships and training, it wasn't enough to meet their requirements."

P5: "I applied for multiple positions, but I struggled to compete with candidates who had years of work experience in the industry"

P2: "Despite having relevant skills and academic training, I found that many companies prioritized hiring those with prior job experience over fresh graduates like me"

One of the most common barriers fresh graduates face in their job search is rejection due to lack of experience. Participants emphasized that despite having relevant academic qualifications and skills, employers often prioritize candidates who already have work experience. Even for entry-level roles, companies set requirements that favor applicants with prior industry exposure, making it difficult for new graduates to secure employment. This situation creates a cycle where fresh graduates struggle to gain experience because experience is required to get hired. As a result, many graduates feel discouraged and undervalued, leading some to accept internships, short-term contracts, or jobs outside their field to build their work experience.

According to Gratitude & Zembe (2020), fresh graduates encounter significant challenges in entering the workforce due to their lack of practical experience. Their study revealed that employers are hesitant to hire new graduates because they require additional training, which increases company costs. Similarly, Singh (2020) found that job postings for fresh graduates often contain unrealistic expectations, requiring both a degree and several years of prior experience, which discourages job seekers and prolongs their unemployment period.

Emerging theme 2: Conflicting Job Post Requirements

Fresh graduates emphasize the unrealistic expectation of job posting for fresh graduates often demand experience, making job applications discouraging

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: "I've seen job postings supposedly for fresh graduates but still asking for two to three years of experience"

P7: "It made me question whether employers truly want fresh graduates or just prefer someone who doesn't need much training"

P2: "Many job postings claim to be for fresh graduates but still require experience, which makes it difficult and discouraging for those of us who are just starting our careers."

P5: "I saw a job posting on Facebook, but it felt like they were being too picky, requiring both a degree and several years of experience"

Fresh graduates highlighted that job postings often include unrealistic requirements that contradict their designation as "entry-level" positions. Many participants expressed frustration over employers demanding two to three years of experience for jobs supposedly meant for fresh graduates. This mismatch between job seekers' qualifications and employer expectations makes job searching discouraging. Additionally, some participants questioned whether companies truly want fresh graduates or prefer candidates who require minimal training. These conflicting job post requirements create a sense of uncertainty and job insecurity among new graduates.

A study by Young & Roos (2024) supports this claim, stating that many companies use misleading job descriptions that deter fresh graduates from applying. They argue that this discourages job seekers and increases employment gaps. Additionally, Smith & Smith (2024) found that graduates who attempt to meet these unrealistic expectations often face burnout and self-doubt, leading to a prolonged and frustrating job search experience. The implication of these findings is that unless employers adjust their hiring practices and provide more realistic entry-level opportunities, many fresh graduates may continue to struggle with unemployment or underemployment, ultimately affecting both individual career growth and the wider labor market.

Emerging theme 3: Financial difficulties in job searching

Fresh graduates point out that expenses like transportation, application costs, and unpaid internships make job searching financially challenging.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: "here were times I had to skip opportunities simply because I couldn't afford the travel expenses"

P9: "Unpaid internships, while valuable, aren't realistic when they don't provide financial support"

P5: "Most job offers are far away, and considering I don't have money for transportation it's difficult to search for jobs"

P2: "So far, it's been difficult for me to find the money to meet job application requirements"

Another major challenge fresh graduates face is financial struggles when searching for jobs. Participants pointed out that expenses such as transportation costs, application fees, and unpaid internships create a financial burden, limiting their ability to attend job interviews or explore better opportunities. Some fresh graduates had to skip job opportunities because they could not afford travel expenses, while others found unpaid internships to be unrealistic since they do not provide financial support. These financial constraints worsen job search struggles, especially for graduates who lack personal savings or family support.

Research by Kalyniuk et al. (2024) highlights that fresh graduate from low-income backgrounds face additional financial barriers that hinder their job search process. They found that many graduates decline job opportunities due to financial limitations, which significantly delays their employment. Similarly, Lu & Härkälä (2024) argue

that graduates without financial stability struggle to participate in networking events, career fairs, or skill-building programs, further reducing their job prospects.

Emerging theme 4: Competition with Experience or Well-connected applicants

Fresh graduates highlight the unfair advantage because some applicants have better credentials or industry connections, making competition tougher

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: " Even if I have the right skills, it sometimes feels like I'm at a disadvantage just because I don't have someone recommending me."

P6: " Some had family connections in the industry, while others had internships at top companies."

P2: " Many of my colleagues had already obtained their professional licenses, while I was still in the process of acquiring mine."

P5: " I noticed that those who are usually hired have strong connections."

Fresh graduates also face intense competition with experienced professionals or well-connected candidates. Many participants felt that, even with strong academic credentials and skills, they were at a disadvantage compared to applicants who had family connections, previous internships in top companies, or professional licenses. This makes job searching highly competitive, especially in industries where networking plays a crucial role in hiring decisions. Graduates without industry connections often feel overlooked, leading to a sense of discouragement and frustration.

A study by Mushketova & Maletina (2020) found that nepotism and networking influence hiring decisions in competitive industries, leaving fresh graduates at a disadvantage if they lack industry connections. Likewise, George et al. (2023) observed that employers often select candidates through referrals rather than standard application processes, making job searching particularly difficult for those who lack personal or professional connections.

Emerging theme 5: Challenges in Networking for Job Opportunities

According to the fresh graduates that they struggle Difficult Networking to establish professional relationships due to lack of guidance and confidence.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P6: " Messaging professionals felt intimidating, and I didn't always get responses."

P7: " Networking was intimidating at first because I didn't know the right way to approach professionals"

P5: " I haven't tried networking to find a job because, for me, social media is not always trustworthy."

P4: " I've tried reaching out to professionals online, but it's difficult to build meaningful connections because many don't respond or seem too busy."

Many fresh graduates struggle with networking and building professional relationships due to lack of guidance and confidence. Participants expressed that reaching out to professionals online felt intimidating, and in many cases, messages were ignored. Some also felt unsure about how to approach networking properly, which limited their chances of making professional connections. Others avoided networking because they did not trust social

media or believed that it would not lead to real job opportunities. This lack of confidence in networking significantly reduces their ability to access hidden job markets where many opportunities are filled through referrals.

According to Santos (2020), networking is one of the most effective strategies for career success, yet many fresh graduates fail to utilize it due to fear of rejection or lack of networking skills. Their study found that graduates who actively engage in networking events or professional communities have higher employment rates. Similarly, Yu et al. (2024) emphasize that mentorship programs and career workshops help graduates build the confidence needed to connect with industry professionals, improving their job prospects.

Emerging theme 6: Oversaturation of the job market

Many fresh graduates says that the too many of them compete for limited job opportunities, making employment difficult.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P6: " There are many fresh graduates competing for a limited number of positions"

P9: " Many end up taking unrelated jobs first"

P2: " The problem is that there are too many fresh graduates who have obtained their licenses but remain jobless. "

P5: " In my field, many graduates are forced to take jobs unrelated to their studies because there aren't enough entry-level opportunities."

Fresh graduates also struggle with oversaturation in the job market, as too many candidates compete for a limited number of positions. Many participants pointed out that even those with professional licenses remain jobless due to high competition in their field. Others shared that many graduates end up taking jobs unrelated to their degrees because of the lack of entry-level opportunities. This forces fresh graduates to settle for positions below their qualifications, making career advancement more difficult.

According to Bhandari et al. (2021), oversaturation in certain industries results in job seekers accepting lower-paying roles outside their field. Their study found that graduates in fields like business and healthcare often take unrelated jobs due to a lack of openings in their industry. Additionally, Ciff et al. (2024) highlight that labor market oversaturation is a growing concern, as more graduates enter the workforce each year without a proportional increase in job opportunities.

Strategies Used by Fresh Graduates in Applying for a Job.

To overcome the challenges of job searching, fresh graduates use different strategies such as improving their résumés, enhancing skills, networking, and exploring online platforms to increase their chances of employment.

Emerging theme 1: Preferred Platforms and Their Effectiveness

Fresh graduates explore multiple online job platforms, but their effectiveness varies. LinkedIn is frequently used for professional networking, while Job Street and Indeed offer a wider range of job listings for entry-level roles. However, many graduates face challenges with job postings requiring experience, limiting their chances of securing interviews.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: " I used LinkedIn, Job Street, and Indeed, but I didn't find LinkedIn as useful as people say. Many job postings required years of experience, even for entry-level roles."

P4: "LinkedIn was great for networking and connecting with recruiters, but job Street had the most entry-level positions that fit my qualifications."

P5: "Indeed had many job postings, but some lacked proper job descriptions, making it hard to know what employers were looking for."

P7: "I received the most responses from job Street, while LinkedIn helped me connect with recruiters, though not all of them replied"

Job search platforms play a significant role in employment-seeking strategies, but fresh graduates often find that experience requirements hinder their applications. While LinkedIn helps with networking, direct job applications are more successful on job Street and Indeed. However, unclear job descriptions on these platforms create uncertainty in job seekers.

According to Xu and Saxton (2022) conducted a study on the effectiveness of LinkedIn in job search outcomes and found that while the platform enhances professional branding and visibility, it does not always guarantee job placement. Their research highlights that LinkedIn is highly beneficial for mid-career professionals and experienced job seekers, but fresh graduates often struggle to secure job offers due to the prevalence of experience-based hiring criteria. The study also suggests that graduates who actively engage with industry professionals and participate in discussions tend to receive more responses from recruiters, though this is not always the case for all users. Lu and Zhou (2023) examined the role of job boards in modern job search strategies and emphasized that while platforms like job Street and Indeed provide easy access to numerous job listings, they lack transparency in job descriptions. Many job seekers find it challenging to determine the specific qualifications employers are looking for, leading to uncertainty and unsuccessful applications. The study also found that job boards that allow for direct employer interaction and provide detailed job postings increase the likelihood of successful job placements, highlighting the importance of clarity in job advertisements.

Emerging theme 2: The Importance of Resume Customization

Graduates who tailor their resumes and cover letters to fit job descriptions tend to receive better responses. Strategic keyword placement, industry-specific formatting, and highlighting relevant experiences increase their chances of getting interviews.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: "After modifying my resume to emphasize my internship experience and relevant skills, I was invited for an interview."

P:4 "I created multiple versions of my resume tailored to different job industries instead of rewriting everything for each application."

P:5 "I added specific keywords from job descriptions to my cover letter, and it made a difference in getting interview invitations."

P:6 "Highlighting leadership and teamwork experience in my resume helped me stand out, especially when I lacked work experience."

Personalizing resumes and cover letters is an effective job-seeking strategy. Graduates who focus on aligning their application materials with job descriptions and emphasizing relevant experience increase their interview chances. A lack of customization often results in fewer callbacks.

Brown and Taylor (2021) explored the effectiveness of resume customization and its impact on interview callback rates. Their findings suggest that tailoring a resume to align with job descriptions significantly increases the chances of being shortlisted. Employers are more likely to respond positively to applications where candidates emphasize relevant skills, use industry-specific keywords, and structure their resumes in an easily readable format. The study also found that generic resumes, which do not highlight job-specific competencies,

are often overlooked by recruiters and automated application tracking systems. Martinez (2023) analyzed the role of cover letters in job applications and found that personalized cover letters significantly enhance employer interest. The study revealed that employers value candidates who demonstrate an understanding of the company's values and job expectations. Job seekers who integrate specific skills, past experiences, and company knowledge into their cover letters tend to perform better in the hiring process. Martinez also noted that highlighting soft skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork in resumes and cover letters contributes to higher interview success rates.

Emerging theme 3: Opportunities and Limitations of Job Fairs

Job fairs serve as a direct interaction point between job seekers and employers. While some graduates benefit from on-the-spot interviews, others feel that job fairs are merely for collecting resumes, offering little immediate hiring potential.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: "I attended a university job fair and was able to speak with recruiters, one of whom scheduled an interview on the spot."

P4: "Some job fairs were helpful, but others just felt like a way for companies to collect resumes without offering real opportunities."

P5: "I met recruiters at a job fair who gave useful career advice, even though I didn't receive an immediate job offer."

P6: "A company representative at a job fair explained their hiring process, which helped me prepare better for future applications."

Job fairs present both opportunities and challenges. Some graduates successfully secure interviews, while others feel that many companies use job fairs for employer branding rather than immediate hiring. The effectiveness of job fairs depends on how actively recruiters engage with candidates.

Nguyen and Harris (2022) conducted a study on job fairs as a recruitment strategy and found that while they serve as a useful networking tool, their direct hiring success rate remains relatively low. Many employers use job fairs primarily to gather resumes rather than to conduct immediate hiring. The study also pointed out that job fairs offer fresh graduates an opportunity to engage with recruiters, gain industry insights, and receive career advice, but actual job placements resulting from these events remain limited. Successful job fair participants tend to be those who approach recruiters confidently, ask insightful questions, and follow up with companies after the event. Mason, R. (2021). compared the effectiveness of university job fairs versus public job fairs and found that university job fairs generally provide better outcomes for fresh graduates. These events are often tailored to match students' academic backgrounds and provide a more structured hiring process. Public job fairs, on the other hand, tend to attract a broader audience, making it more competitive and harder for fresh graduates to stand out. The study also suggested that students who prepare for job fairs by researching potential employers and refining their resumes tend to experience higher levels of success.

Emerging theme 4: Networking for Employment Opportunities

Building professional networks through LinkedIn and other platforms increases job prospects. However, getting responses from recruiters is difficult without prior engagement or referrals. Some fresh graduates find networking more effective through alternative channels like online job groups and in-person events.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P3: "I connected with professionals in my field on LinkedIn and engaged with their posts, but responses were rare unless I had a referral."

P4: "Networking helped me learn about job openings that weren't widely advertised, and some recruiters even reached out to me directly."

P5: "I joined Facebook groups and online forums for job seekers, which led to more job leads than LinkedIn."

P6: "Attending networking events in person helped me gain better connections than just sending messages online."

Networking is a crucial part of job searching, but fresh graduates struggle to gain meaningful responses from recruiters. While LinkedIn is useful, alternative networking strategies, such as attending career events or joining online communities, provide additional opportunities.

Stewart and Clark (2023) explored the impact of LinkedIn engagement on job search success and found that professionals who actively participate in LinkedIn communities, share relevant content, and engage with industry leaders tend to receive more job opportunities. However, their study also noted that many recruiters prioritize candidates with prior industry experience, making it difficult for fresh graduates to gain traction through networking alone. They concluded that while LinkedIn is a valuable tool for professional growth, job seekers must combine it with offline networking strategies for better results. Lopez and Kim (2022) analyzed the role of informal networking in employment outcomes and found that personal referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations play a crucial role in job acquisition. Their study revealed that many job openings are never publicly advertised and are instead filled through internal referrals and professional connections. Fresh graduates who actively participate in networking events, join online job-seeking communities, and seek mentorship from experienced professionals tend to have a higher chance of securing employment. The research emphasized that networking is not just about making connections but also about maintaining relationships and demonstrating professional value over time.

Graduates' Perspectives on the Effect of Tertiary Education on Job Searching

Graduates often view tertiary education as a crucial factor in their job search, believing that the knowledge, skills, and credentials they gained in college significantly influence their employability and career opportunities.

Emerging theme 1: Internship Exposure and Career Readiness

Internships play a crucial role in equipping fresh graduates with real-world experience, but many feel that career counseling and job placement support are insufficient. Some institutions offer strong internship programs but lack structured guidance on transitioning into the workforce

These responses support the emerged theme:

P2: "(Name of school) provided valuable internship experiences through practice teaching, which helped us gain real-world classroom exposure. However, career counseling and resume-building workshops could have been more extensive."

P1: "(Name of school) provided valuable internship opportunities, but there could have been more career development programs, such as mock interviews and networking events."

P5: "(Name of school) provided hands-on training through internships with law enforcement agencies, which was very beneficial. However, there could have been more preparatory programs for entrance exams in agencies."

P9: "(Name of school) provided internship programs where we worked on real farms and agricultural businesses, which gave us practical experience. However, more guidance on agribusiness opportunities and government funding programs would have been helpful."

Internships provide critical exposure to industry practices, yet many graduates feel unprepared when transitioning from academia to employment. While hands-on experience is beneficial, the absence of comprehensive career counseling, resume workshops, and networking opportunities puts some graduates at a disadvantage. Institutions need to integrate career preparation programs alongside internships to ensure a smoother transition into the workforce

Henderson and Riley (2022) found that while internships improve job readiness, institutions must complement them with structured career guidance. Their study revealed that universities offering mentorship programs alongside internships produce graduates with higher employment rates. Similarly, Jackson and Bridgstock (2023) emphasize the role of employability training, noting that institutions must move beyond internship placements and provide real-world application strategies through resume workshops and interview preparation.

Emerging theme 2: Practical Application of Academic Learning

Graduates recognize the importance of specific courses in their job search. Many found that industry-relevant coursework, such as financial statement analysis, classroom management, or forensic science, helped them answer technical interview questions effectively

These responses support the emerged theme:

P1: "The financial statement analysis course was particularly helpful. During an interview, I was given a case study on a company's financial health and asked to provide recommendations."

P2: "Classroom management was one of the most practical courses. During interviews, I was often asked how I would handle disruptive students or keep a class engaged."

P5: "The Forensic Science course was particularly helpful. During an interview, I was asked about crime scene investigation procedures, and my understanding of evidence collection helped me confidently answer technical questions."

P6: "The Structural Analysis course was particularly useful. During an interview, I was asked to evaluate the stability of a proposed building design, and my knowledge of load distribution helped me answer the technical questions."

Academic coursework that incorporates real-world applications significantly aids graduates in job interviews. Employers prioritize candidates who can demonstrate practical problem-solving skills over those who solely rely on theoretical knowledge. Therefore, universities should align curricula with industry demands by integrating hands-on case studies, software training, and professional simulations.

Wilson and Harper (2021) found that industry-specific coursework directly impacts employability. Their study concluded that graduates who took applied courses, such as case-based financial analysis or technical lab work, performed better in interviews. Likewise, Harper et al. (2011) emphasize that universities must adapt curricula to technological advancements, ensuring graduates are equipped with skills aligned with market demands.

Emerging theme 3: Prestige vs. Skill-Based Hiring

Graduates from less prestigious universities recognize that top-tier schools offer networking advantages. However, they emphasize that skill demonstration through internships, certifications, and real-world experience helps level the playing field.

These responses support the emerged theme:

P2: "Graduates from well-known universities sometimes have an advantage, especially in private and international schools. However, strong teaching skills and experience can level the playing field."

P3: "Yes, graduates from prestigious universities often have better initial opportunities due to strong alumni networks. However, I found that demonstrating my skills through projects and internships helped me compete."

P6: "Yes, top universities often have stronger industry connections, which can give their graduates an advantage. However, in civil engineering, skills, certifications, and field experience are more important."

P9: "Graduates from well-known agricultural universities sometimes have an edge in research and government positions. However, in agriculture, experience and practical skills matter more."

While elite universities offer networking advantages, skill-based hiring is gaining traction in competitive industries. Employers prioritize candidates with hands-on experience and industry certifications over those relying solely on university prestige. Fresh graduates must focus on upskilling and practical exposure to remain competitive.

Backman and Barker (2022) examined the role of university prestige in hiring decisions and found that while top-tier schools provide networking benefits, skill-based hiring is becoming more prominent. Meanwhile, (Brown's Cremation & Funeral Service, 2023) argue that companies now prioritize candidates with relevant experience, certifications, and technical skills over academic pedigree.

CONCLUSION

The transition from university to the professional workforce is a critical phase in the lives of fresh graduates. This study explored the phenomenological journey of fresh graduates seeking employment in competitive industries, identifying the barriers they face and the strategies they employ to secure job opportunities. While tertiary education provides fundamental knowledge and skills, many graduates struggle with misaligned expectations, lack of work experience, and a highly competitive job market.

The findings revealed several key challenges, including rejections due to lack of experience, unrealistic job posting requirements, financial constraints in job searching, and difficulties in professional networking. Many participants expressed frustration over employers demanding prior experience even for entry-level positions, which creates a cycle where graduates cannot gain experience because they are not given opportunities. Additionally, competition with well-connected applicants and an oversaturated job market further intensifies the employment struggle.

Despite these difficulties, graduates actively seek ways to improve their job prospects. Common strategies include modifying resumes and cover letters to match job descriptions, utilizing online job platforms, attending job fairs, networking through LinkedIn and industry events, and taking online courses to enhance their skills. However, many still feel that universities do not adequately prepare them for the realities of job hunting, highlighting the need for stronger career guidance and more practical industry exposure during college.

This study emphasizes the urgent need for reforms in education, hiring practices, and employment policies to support fresh graduates in their job-seeking journey. Universities should enhance career readiness programs, employers should reconsider experience-based hiring, and graduates should continue to upskill and network effectively. By addressing these gaps, stakeholders can create a more inclusive and supportive employment landscape, ensuring that fresh graduates can successfully transition from academia to professional careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational institutions should enhance career readiness initiatives by providing resume-writing workshops, mock interviews, and internship guidance. These programs can better equip students with practical knowledge and confidence before entering the job market.

Colleges and universities should establish stronger partnerships with industries to offer hands-on internship programs, seminars, and job fairs. This collaboration will help bridge the gap between academic training and actual workplace expectations.

Fresh graduates should invest in continuous learning by enrolling in online courses, attending seminars, or obtaining professional certifications to remain competitive and adaptable in a rapidly changing job market.

Employers are encouraged to design realistic job requirements for entry-level positions by focusing on skills, attitude, and potential rather than prior work experience. Providing mentorship and onboarding programs can also help new graduates transition effectively into the workforce.

Government agencies should develop employment assistance programs and provide incentives to companies that hire fresh graduates. Establishing career counseling centers and offering free training programs can also support unemployed graduates in finding meaningful employment.

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