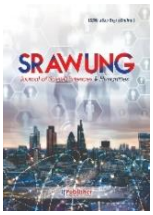

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Employability Pathways in Tertiary Education: Insights from Cambodian Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the institutional factors that influence students' perceptions of their employability in higher education institutions in Cambodia. A structured questionnaire disseminated over social media sites like Telegram and Messenger was used to gather data for a quantitative study design. A non-probability sampling strategy that included quota, convenience, and purposive sampling was used to guarantee representation among student cohorts and academic disciplines. Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," respondents scored their perceptions. AMOS, SPSS, JASP, and structured excel based reliability and validity calculator were used to analyze 265 valid responses to check the reliability, vcalidity, relationship and significant impacts between each variable, including curriculum relevance, personal planning development, career development learning, work experience, extra-corricular activities, exposure to real world activites, and students' employability. The findings show that local colleges have a significant impact on graduate workforce readiness by identifying critical pathways linking institutional practices to students' employability. The study offers practical recommendations for institutional leaders and policymakers to enhance curriculum design, strengthen student support mechanisms, and foster employability-focused strategies within Cambodian higher education. These insights contribute to ongoing efforts to improve educational outcomes and align institutional practices with the evolving demands of the national workforce.

Keywords: *Career Development Learning, Extra-curricular Activities, Exposure to Real-World Activities, Personal Development Planning, Work Experience*

INTRODUCTION

Enrollment rates in higher education have increased dramatically during the past 20 years, from 19% in 2000 to 43% in 2023 (Tesema & Fathoni, 2023). Increased access to postsecondary education globally is reflected in this upward trend. Higher enrollment does not, however, guarantee better graduation rates or job success; many students still face difficulties making a smooth transition into the workforce because of deficiencies in professional readiness, vocational preparation, and institutional support.

In the competitive job market of today, a university degree is no longer enough to secure employment. Companies are looking more and more for applicants with real-world experience, industry knowledge, and practical skills. Through internships, students can explore different professions, define their future goals, and evaluate their own strengths and areas for development, bridging the gap between academic theory and workplace realities (Ly, 2025).

Universities worldwide are rapidly shifting their courses to emphasize practical skills and career preparedness rather than the traditional emphasis on disseminating knowledge (By, 2024; Tight, 2023). A greater dedication to educating students for professional settings and improving their employability is reflected in this change. Modern graduate qualities are purposefully designed to correspond with industry norms and 21st-century competencies, as noted by (Ng et al., 2021). These qualities are intended to satisfy both certification standards and the changing demands of businesses. They include the transferable abilities necessary for successful engagement in professional tasks as well as discipline-specific information.

Crucially, employment development goes beyond classroom education (Hour, 2025). According to Jackson and Dean (2023), it includes extracurricular activities that enhance students' professional awareness and personal development, such as volunteer work, travel, part-time jobs, and university-led career programs, as well as co-curricular offerings. According to Zewdie (2024), today's higher education landscape, academic achievement alone is not sufficient. Graduates are more valued on their holistic development. Students acquire diverse skillsets such leadership, teamwork, adapatability, and communication from extracurricular activities ranging from study clubs and volunteering to informal support systems. These would directly improve their employmeability prospects.

It is to be noted that different authors around the world have studied employability using similar variables and hypotheses. One major study by Pitan and Muller (2021) based on South African universities. The study found that curriculum and personal development planning has the strongest influence on student employability, while extracurricular and real-world activities had little impact. However, their study was limited since it was based mainly on student perceptions and one regional context. Building on their framework, adopting the same variables

and hypotheses, this research applies structural equation modeling (SEM) in Cambodian higher education to give a stronger analysis of how different factors affect employability. The results show that extracurricular activities are the most important driver of employability, followed by personal development planning and real-world exposure. These findings challenge the earlier South African results and show that employability development depends on cultural and institutional settings. The novelty of this research lies in its stronger method and its focus on Cambodia, filling a gap in Southeast Asian studies and showing that extracurricular engagement is central to preparing students for the workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum

The curriculum, which establishes the parameters of learning, pedagogical strategies, and the alignment of academic content with practical needs, is a fundamental tool for influencing students' employability. Students who receive a carefully thought-out curriculum are prepared with pertinent skills and information that meet the demands of the modern workforce. According to Isa et al. (2020), graduates who take courses that incorporate soft skills like teamwork, communication, and flexibility with new technology and market trends will have a competitive edge.

Project-based learning, internships, and simulations are examples of experiential learning strategies that improve students' capacity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world situations (Sah et al., 2024). These techniques develop transferable skills that are highly valued across industries, like problem-solving, computer literacy, and critical thinking. Purohit et al. (2025) state that incorporating employability-focused modules, like advisory sessions, career planning seminars, and reflective practices, can help students advance both personally and professionally. In particular, entrepreneurial education fosters initiative and creativity, which improves employment results.

Students are better equipped to handle changing job markets through curricula that encourage innovation, self-directed learning, and lifelong learning. Graduates' skill sets are expanded by interdisciplinary approaches, which help them adjust to a variety of professions and industries (Attah et al., 2025). These instructional techniques help graduates become more resilient and creative in addition to increasing their employability.

Work Experience

Work experience before or throughout college has a big impact on students' confidence and readiness for the workforce. Students with job experience exhibit stronger career strategies and higher self-assurance regarding their employability than their counterparts without such exposure (Grant-Smith & Weiler, 2024). One of the most successful employability interventions is post-secondary job

experience, which is associated with more interview invitation, lower unemployment rates within six months of graduation, and higher starting pay. (Richardt et al., 2024)

Internships, part-time jobs, and volunteer work help students match their career options with their personal talents and goals while developing critical transferable skills including communication, teamwork, and time management (Shaheen et al., 2022). Insight into workplace customs and expectations is gained through structured placements, which frequently results in improved employer relations and possible employment offers (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Additionally, early exposure to professional settings helps students form more specific career goals and improves their sense of direction. Volunteering and internships encourage initiative, ethical engagement, and resilience, all of which are valued by employers more and more (Nursey-Bray et al., 2022).

Personal Development Planning

A key component of helping students express their value in the job market is Personal Development Planning (PDP). It fosters introspective contemplation regarding individual objectives, proficiencies, and opportunities for development (Bintani, 2020). Employers greatly value transferable abilities like communication, problem-solving, and leadership, which students discover and develop through PDP (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). Students can match their academic endeavors with their career ambitions by using SMART goals in PDP frameworks, which makes learning more purposeful and significant (*Creating Effective SMART Goals Examples for Students*, 2025). Additionally, PDP improves students' effectiveness in communicating their competencies on resumes and in interviews, which leads to better career outcomes.

PDP is frequently incorporated into coursework or portfolios by institutions, enabling students to link their academic experiences with their career goals. This integration facilitates well-informed choices on internships, postsecondary education, and employment applications. Additionally, PDP supports the holistic development of job preparedness by encouraging students to gain employability value from extracurricular activities like volunteering and part-time work (Ooi, 2021).

Career Development Learning

The systematic process through which people, especially students, gain the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes required to manage their lifetime career paths is known as career development learning, or CDL. Beyond securing a job right away, CDL enables people to make wise choices, adjust to changing labor markets, and pursue fulfilling, long-term careers (Ho et al., 2023). CDL has a positive effect on students' perceived employability, according to empirical data. When combined with strong human capital development, such academic success and cultural

sensitivity, CDL dramatically boosts students' confidence in finding and keeping a job, according to a study done in Vietnam (Tran, 2023). CDL promotes the development of career competences (e.g., self-profiling, decision-making), cultural capital (knowledge and credentials), and scholastic capital (knowledge and qualifications), all of which are essential for success in the labor market.

Integrating CDL into higher education curricula enables institutions to better align graduate capabilities with employer expectations, thereby mitigating skill mismatches and reducing graduate unemployment (Ho et al., 2023). CDL also promotes student agency by encouraging ownership of career pathways, enhancing resilience, and fostering adaptability in dynamic employment landscapes (Drosos & Korfiatis, 2023). Recent studies demonstrate how CDL affects important employability characteristics that directly affect job preparedness and long-term performance, including as career control, professional networking, and work exploration (Tran, 2023). These results provide credence to the thoughtful integration of CDL into student support services and curriculum design.

Extra-Curricular Activities

ECAs, which are described as planned or unstructured activities outside of the official curriculum, are essential for improving students' employability, social development, and personal growth. Club involvement, leadership positions, volunteer work, and mentorship programs are just a few of the many activities that ECAs cover. In Higher Education Research & Development, Hui et al. (2021) list work-integrated learning, mentoring, and extracurricular employment as some of the best ways to develop a professional identity and land a job. Students can show initiative, acquire specific skills, and give prospective employers a well-rounded profile by participating in ECAs (Zewdie, 2024). Further evidence that mentorship and leadership programs provide significant employability benefits, especially for students from different backgrounds, comes from Springer's research (Jackson & Dean, 2023).

According to an extensive study that involved 84,000 Australian graduates, ECAs had the greatest positive influence on job outcomes, particularly when it came to leadership positions and mentoring. Significantly, students with disabilities, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those from rural locations benefited disproportionately, indicating that ECAs support equity in employability outcomes. By connecting personal values with career objectives and comprehending workplace norms, these activities assist students in developing a professional identity, which is a crucial starting point for creating engaging employability narratives during the hiring process (Jackson & Dean, 2023). ECAs encourage career agency, which is the capacity to actively direct one's career, and improve skills including job exploration, career control, and networking, amd it should be strategically incorporated into student development programs and institutional employability frameworks (Hui et al., 2021).

Exposure to Real Work Activities

According to Archer et al. (2021), real-world activities are organized educational experiences that allow students to use their academic knowledge in real-world situations by simulating or directly interacting with professionals. These encounters consist of industrial partnerships, employer-led projects, simulations, and internships. Such exposure improves students' self-esteem, competence, and job preparation (Hui et al., 2021; Pitan & Muller, 2021).

Students who participate in real-world tasks are better able to identify their talents, values, and career goals as well as develop job-specific abilities, workplace etiquette, and a professional self-concept. It boosts students' chances of landing and succeeding in a job and promotes proactive career planning. Additionally, professional networks are formed through real-world learning and are essential for gaining access to hidden employment markets. For students from underrepresented backgrounds who may lack industry contacts, this is especially advantageous. In addition to technical skills, practical experience develops critical soft skills including emotional intelligence, teamwork, communication, and flexibility. According to a Nigerian study, employment results and real-world learning are strongly positively correlated, highlighting the strategic importance of experiential learning in higher education.

Students Employability

According to Ramaci et al. (2021), employability is a multifaceted concept that includes more than just being able to get employment; it also includes maintaining meaningful work, adjusting to change, and succeeding at all stages of one's career. Employability is the ability to move independently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment (Römgens et al., 2020). In particular, student employability refers to a graduate's ability to land, hold, and advance in a fulfilling job during the course of their careers. It combines scholarly understanding, real-world experience, character traits, and strategic career competencies. Value creation, confidence, and adaptability are important measures of employability in the fast-paced job market of today (Mainga et al., 2022).

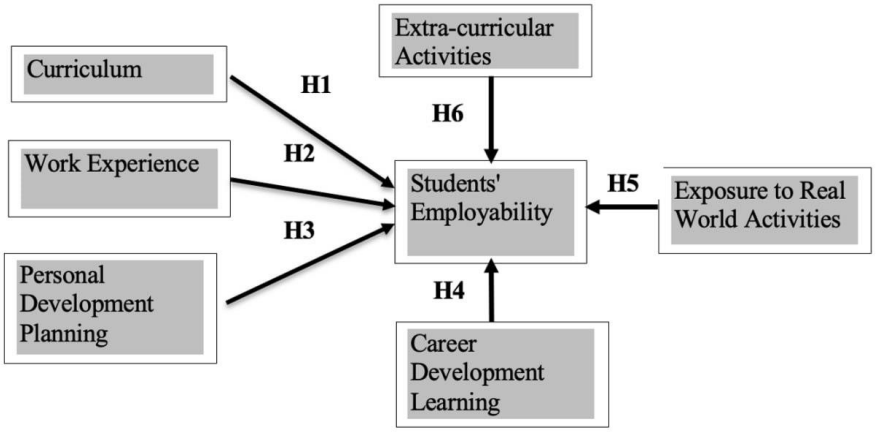

Figure 1 Research Framework
Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Following Hair and Brunsveld (2019), this study adopts a quantitative research design, which relies on numerical data and statistical modeling to test hypotheses and establish causal relationships among employability development factors influencing students' perceived employability within Cambodian higher education. The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled in business-related disciplines, spanning multiple majors and academic year levels—from freshmen to seniors.

A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, combining convenience, purposive, and quota sampling techniques to ensure diverse representation across programs and year cohorts. This approach was suitable given the exploratory nature of the study and the accessibility of participants through digital platforms. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed in Google Forms and disseminated via social media channels, including Telegram and Messenger groups. The instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree") to measure student perceptions across multiple institutional dimensions.

A total of 265 valid responses were obtained and this study employed a multi-platform analytical approach to ensure methodological transparency and rigor. JASP and SPSS were used to calculate reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) and factor loadings. A structured, Excel-based reliability and validity calculator was used to calculate discriminant validity, average variance extracted (AVE), and construct reliability (CR). Latent variable modeling and goodness-of-fit assessment were conducted using CFA and structural equation modeling (SEM) in Amos 26.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profiles

Table 1 Respondent Profile (N=265)

Profiles	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	122	46.0
	Female	143	54.0
Year Level	Bachelor's Degree	213	80.4
	Master's Degree	48	18.1
	Doctoral Degree	4	1.5
Majors	Management	97	36.6
	Accounting	108	40.8
	Marketing	36	13.6
	Banking & Finance	18	6.8
	Law	6	2.3
	Tourism & Hospitality	4	1.5
	Other	12	4.5
Current Status	Student	142	53.6
	Employee/Self-Employed	71	26.8
	Government Official	39	14.7
	Business Owner	13	4.9
Current Position	Staff	173	65.3
	Supervisor	27	10.2
	Manager	41	15.5
	Owner	24	9.1

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

From table 1, a total of 265 respondents participated in this study, comprising a balanced gender distribution with 54% female and 46% male. The majority were pursuing undergraduate degrees (80.4%), followed by master's (18.1%) and doctoral studies (1.5%). Participants represented a range of business-related disciplines, with the largest groups from accounting (40.8%) and management (36.6%), followed by marketing, banking and finance, law, and tourism. In terms of current status, over half identified as students (53.6%), while others were employed or self-employed (26.8%), government officials (14.7%), or business owners (4.9%). Regarding occupational roles, most respondents held staff-level positions (65.3%), with others serving as managers (15.5%), supervisors (10.2%), or owners (9.1%). This diverse profile reflects a broad cross-section of Cambodian business students and early-career professionals, providing a rich foundation for analyzing employability perceptions across academic and professional contexts.

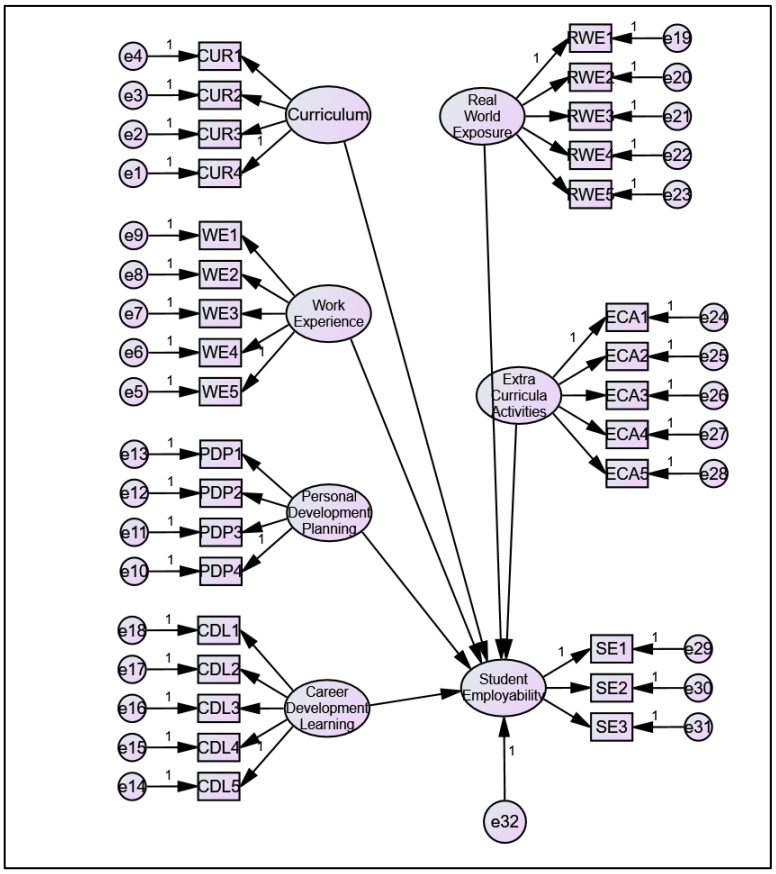

Figure 2 Structural Equation Modelling
Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

Structual Equation Modelling is a quantitative technique that integrates factor analysis and regression to test both measurement validity and cuasal relationships among variables, and it it is used to analyze employability pathways in this research, testing all the adopted hypotheses (Hair et al., 2021).

Factor Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for Each Latent Construct

Table 2 CFA Results Summary

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE	Alpha(α)
Curriculum	CUR1	0.786	0.869	0.623	0.864
	CUR2	0.764			
	CUR3	0.802			
	CUR4	0.806			
Work Experience	WE1	0.853	0.902	0.648	0.896
	WE2	0.832			
	WE3	0.774			
	WE4	0.765			
	WE5	0.799			
	PDP1	0.830	0.887	0.663	0880

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE	Alpha(α)
Personal Development Planning	PDP2	0.824			
	PDP3	0.780			
	PDP4	0.823			
Career Development Learning	CDL1	0.801	0.925	0.710	0.920
	CDL2	0.786			
	CDL3	0.876			
	CDL4	0.883			
	CDL5	0.864			
Real Word Exposure	RWE1	0.845	0.910	0.668	0.907
	RWE2	0.832			
	RWE3	0.836			
	RWE4	0.827			
	RWE5	0.745			
Extra-Curricular Activities	ECA1	0.803	0.904	0.652	0.899
	ECA2	0.861			
	ECA3	0.788			
	ECA4	0.795			
	ECA5	0.790			
Students' Employability	SE1	0.873	0.892	0.733	0.867
	SE2	0.884			
	SE3	0.810			

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

Based on Table 2, Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results show that seven important constructs—curriculum, work experience, career development learning, personal development planning, real-world exposure, extracurricular activities, and employability have high measurement quality. With Composite Reliability (CR) values ranging from 0.869 to 0.925 and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients reaching 0.86—much higher than the considered baseline of 0.70—each construct exhibits remarkable internal consistency. Because all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values fall between 0.623 and 0.733 and exceed the minimum criteria of 0.50, convergent validity is also well supported.

All of the items have consistently high standardized factor loadings, ranging from 0.745 to 0.884, showing that the latent constructs and observable indicators are clearly aligned. Significantly, Students' Employability has the highest AVE (0.733) and Career Development Learning has the highest CR (0.925), indicating that both dimensions are very well-defined and accurately measured. Overall, the CFA results validate the validity and reliability of the measuring model, offering a strong basis for future curriculum evaluation, employability-focused research in higher education, and structural modeling.

Table 3 Discriminant Validity (Fronell-Larcker Criterion)

Variables	CUR	WE	PDP	CDL	RWE	ECA	SE
CUR	0.789						
WE	0.669	0.805					
PDP	0.700	0.704	0.814				
CDL	0.475	0.579	0.457	0.710			
RWE	0.423	0.539	0.445	0.766	0.817		
ECA	0.480	0.559	0.483	0.752	0.795	0.807	
SE	0.527	0.547	0.553	0.623	0.663	0.742	0.856

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

Table 4 Structural Equation Modelling Results Summary

Model	Unstandardized	Standard Eror	Standardized	t	p
CUR	0.130	0.071	0.107	1.839	0.067
WE	-0.010	0.064	-0.010	-0.154	0.878
PDP	0.193	0.066	0.178	2.925	0.004
CDL	0.027	0.060	0.030	0.444	0.657
RWE	0.144	0.069	0.147	2.075	0.039
ECA	0.465	0.069	0.471	6.730	<.001

Source: Author's Analysis (2025)

According to the findings of the Structural Equation Modeling (Table 4), three constructs significantly affect students' employability. ECA had the greatest effect, with a standardized coefficient of 0.471, a t-value of 6.921, and a p-value less than.001. This suggests that students who participate actively in extracurricular activities—like clubs, contests, or volunteer work—have a higher chance of acquiring employable skills. Additionally, PDP makes a significant contribution ($\beta = 0.178$, $t = 2.901$, $p = 0.004$), emphasizing the value of self-directed learning, goal-setting, and reflection. The effect of Real World Exposure (RWE) is moderate but significant ($\beta = 0.147$, $t = 2.063$, $p = 0.039$), confirming the importance of industry visits, internships, and hands-on training in preparing students for the workforce.

Career Development Learning (CDL), Work Experience (WE), and Curriculum (CUR) on the other hand, do not have statistically significant effects in this model. The slight favorable influence of CUR ($\beta = 0.107$, $t = 1.837$, $p = 0.067$) is just below the traditional significance level. Their current form suggests minimal impact, as evidenced by the relatively mild effects of CDL and WE ($\beta = 0.030$, $t = 0.504$, $p = 0.614$; and $\beta = -0.010$, $t = -0.165$, $p = 0.869$, respectively). Although formal education and previous job experience are important, these findings suggest that they could need to be revised or better integrated to enhance employability outcomes. The SEM results, taken as a whole, highlight the significance of experiential learning, personal planning, and active engagement in determining students' preparedness for the workforce.

The results of this study show that extracurricular activities had the biggest impact on employability, followed by real-world exposure (RWE) and personal development planning (PDP). These findings are consistent with those of Jackson and Tomlinson (2022), who underlined the significance of extracurricular activity, and Pitan and Muller (2021), who highlighted the role of PDP. The impact of curriculum and work experience in this study, however, differs from earlier findings. Drawing on data from Australia and the UK, Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) provided a more nuanced viewpoint by demonstrating that students placed a high value on work experience, extracurricular activities, and co-curriculars, especially when they were in line with their professional objectives. According to their study, which emphasized the value of networks, self-assurance, and professional identity, extracurricular activity is crucial for employability when it is carefully linked to career outcomes.

In contrast Pitan and Muller (2021), who focused on South African universities, discovered that extracurricular and real-world activities had little impact on students' self-perceived employability, whereas curriculum and personal development planning had the greatest effects. However, the study's regional focus and dependence on student views limited its applicability. Taken together, these three studies show that employability development is very contextual: students in Australia, the UK, and Cambodia place more value on extracurricular and experiential learning, whereas South African students view curriculum and PDP as having the most influence. This emphasizes that rather than using a one-size-fits-all strategy, institutions around the world must customize employability tactics to their institutional and cultural contexts.

The findings also have significant ramifications for strategic planning, curriculum change, and quality control in higher education in Cambodia. Institutions that want to increase the employability of their graduates must adopt comprehensive, experience-driven learning methods rather than just delivering knowledge. A need for pedagogical innovation and greater connection with real-world competencies is shown by the limited impact of standard curriculum and career modules. Policymakers and academic leaders ought to think about updating national standards to highlight employability-boosting activities like community involvement, reflective learning, and the development of soft skills. A trustworthy framework for continuous evaluation, benchmarking, and evidence-based decision-making across faculties and programs is also offered by the validated measurement model.

CONCLUSION

According to the CFA results, there is good reliability and convergent validity in the measurement of all seven constructs: curriculum, work experience, personal development planning, career development learning, real-world exposure, extracurricular activities, and students' employability. As evidenced by factor

loadings, CR, AVE, and Cronbach's Alpha values that beyond suggested thresholds, each construct exhibits good internal consistency. The results of the SEM also show that while curriculum, career development learning, and work experience have limited predictive power in their current form, extracurricular activities, personal development planning, and real-world exposure have statistically significant and meaningful effects on students' employability. These findings collectively imply that active participation, personal agency, and experiential learning have a greater impact on employability outcomes than do standard academic inputs alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions should place a high priority on incorporating organised extracurricular activities, reflective planning exercises, and practical experience within the official curriculum in order to improve employment results. This can entail increasing the number of internships, industry collaborations, service-learning programs, and student-led projects available. Academic programs should incorporate personal development planning through goal-setting activities, career coaching, and mentoring. In the meanwhile, it is important to review curriculum and career development modules to make sure they are skill-oriented, pertinent to the job market, and culturally appropriate. Faculty development initiatives should concentrate on providing teachers with the resources they need to support student-centered and experiential learning, and institutional policies should encourage cross-functional cooperation between academic and extracurricular departments.

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