

Indonesia's Recent University Graduates amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: Employability and Resilience*

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This study investigates the experiences of Indonesia's fresh university graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic and their efforts to enter the world of work. We discuss this issue by referring to the scholarly discussion of youths' transition to work in the post-industrial era, during which traditional full-time and life-long employment has given way to a more contingent employment landscape. This article relies on data collected from an online survey involving 800 fresh university graduates, in-depth interviews with 16 informants, and focus group discussions with 24 participants. It shows that most fresh graduates have had difficulty finding the jobs they desire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, most of them have adapted resiliently through meaningful activities such as social networking, religious missions, and skill upgrading. We argue that fresh graduates in Indonesia have experienced multiple transitions without any order or regularity (i.e., fractured transitions), which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study enriches our understanding of labor and employability by considering their non-economic dimensions through an exploration of fresh graduates' individual trajectories and socio-economic contexts, and echoes that youth transition is neither linear nor uniform.

*The data collection for this article was funded by the Center for Policy Research, Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture (2020-2021); and the writing process was supported by a publication grant from the Sociology Department of Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia (2021). We gratefully thank all research assistants who helped us to reach all respondents and informants during the peak of the pandemic; and all respondents and informants who were willing to share their experiences and views with us.

Keywords: *fresh university graduates, Indonesia, COVID-19 pandemic, employability, resilience*

Introduction

Most studies have shown that, in the current post-industrial era, young people's transition to work has been marked by high levels of uncertainty. This has occurred in both developed and developing nations (Absor and Utomo 2017; Hardgrove, Rootham, and McDowell 2015; López-Andreu and Verd 2020; Naafs and Skelton 2018; Nilan et al. 2011). Furlong (2019) describes how youths, upon completing their educations, must find transitional employment—a “waiting room” (or, rather, a “zone of liminality”)—before obtaining their desired job. Lippényi (2019) identifies such transitional employment as contingent work, something that has become increasingly common as traditional full-time and life-long employment has given way to an increasingly contingent employment landscape. Workers' attachment to their places of employment is far weaker, as they recognize that, in the current flexible labor market, they may be let go or find better opportunities at any time. Ultimately, not everyone finds their dream job; throughout their lives, they drift without certainty or social insurance. They have become the precariat class, to borrow a term from Standing (2011, pp. 7–9), not even enjoying the same rights and benefits as the working class—i.e., workplace certainty, guaranteed income, and representation.

As Indonesia's workforce is dominated by informal employment, transition is a far more complicated issue. The most recent data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS 2020) indicate that 9.77 million of the country's 203.97 million working-age population are unemployed. Of the 128.45 million Indonesians in the workforce, 39.53% are employed in the formal sector and 60.47% are employed in the informal sector. Nevertheless, Indonesians greatly desire formal employment as civil servants or with private or state-owned enterprises. Conversely, informal employment is marked by high levels of uncertainty, with limited access to social welfare and readily severed workplace ties. Similarly, informal employment often involves smaller businesses, which are more prone to bankruptcy or insolvency.

Further complicating this situation, young Indonesians have graduated from higher education in record numbers over the past two decades. According to Higher Education Statistics (Directorate General of Higher Education 2020), Indonesia's graduates have increased year over year. In 2012/2013, Indonesia had 807,319 graduates; this increased to 1,366,572 in 2019/2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated youths' transition to work and hindered entrepreneurial activities. For instance, a study by Muhyiddin and Nugroho (2021) found that, in the second quarter of 2020—during which Indonesia experienced economic growth of -5.3—more than 80% of businesses reported reduced income; 60% of businesses had to cease operations temporarily; and 9% of businesses declared bankruptcy. Consequently, the labor market experienced a significant blow. Official statistics indicate that, in August 2020—when this research was conducted—29.12 million working-age Indonesians (14.28%)—were affected by COVID-19. This included 2.56 million people who became unemployed, 0.76 million people who left the labor force, 1.77 million people who stopped working temporarily, and 24.03 million people who worked reduced hours.

Such a situation is common in many developing countries in Asia, especially those whose economies rely heavily on the informal sector and tourism. For example, in the Philippines, 1.7 million workers saw significantly reduced income due to the pandemic and another 435,000 lost their jobs in the informal sector due to the pandemic (Bird, Lozano, and Mendoza 2021)

This study seeks to investigate how Indonesia's fresh graduates have sought employment during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the diverse strategies used to bolster their resilience and navigate the transition to work. The academic literature contains no fixed definitions of the term "fresh graduate." In practice, Indonesian higher education tends to consider individuals who graduated within the previous two years to be fresh graduates, and these individuals are most commonly targeted by tracer studies. The fresh graduates in this study are individuals who graduated from major institutions in Indonesia's largest cities.

We argue that fresh graduates in Indonesia have experienced multiple transitions without any order or regularity (i.e., fractured transitions). Most have had difficulty finding the jobs they desire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, these youths have used their values and resources to adapt resiliently through meaningful activities such as social networking, religious missions, and skill upgrading. They have used diverse articulations,

considering not only economic factors but also social ones (prestige, social status, lifestyle, morality, social vision, family, and religious values).

These findings are discussed and contextualized using a sociological perspective. In Western academia, as well as in policy studies conducted by multilateral organizations such as the International Labour Organization and World Bank, “work” is generally defined using an economic paradigm, being perceived as a rational economic activity undertaken by individuals to realize their interests. Such a paradigm clearly distinguishes between paid work and unpaid work. This study, however, follows recent trends in non-Western sociology and anthropology by reaching beyond the economic and appreciating the social dimensions of labor—such as prestige, social status, lifestyle, morality, social vision, family values, and religious values (Ford and Parker 2008; Naafs 2013; Rodeheaver and Zafirovski 2017).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to reveal the changing opportunities and challenges experienced by youths while transitioning to the work force. Fresh graduates have faced paradoxical challenges. On the one hand, technological advances have created numerous jobs and opportunities; on the other, youths have diverse skills and capacities, and the digital ecosystem has only exacerbated the gaps between them. In recent years, Indonesia has produced numerous graduates, but employment opportunities in the formal sector have failed to keep pace. Consequently, many fresh graduates have been compelled to enter the informal sector and hold positions for which they are overqualified.

This article is organized as follows. In this introduction, we have described the focus, questions, main arguments, and empirical/scholarly significance of this study. In the following section, we will discuss the scholarly literature and policy studies on youths, through which we identified the gaps in the current literature. After explaining the methods used for data collection and analysis, we present and discuss the quantitative and qualitative findings simultaneously. Finally, we present our conclusions and highlight this study’s contributions to the literature on youth employment and employability.

Youth, Higher Education, and Employment

Generally, youth studies have focused on the issues of transition and culture. Studies of youths in transition have relied primarily on quantitative approaches, while studies of youth culture have relied heavily on ethnographic

methods. In recent years, scholars from both traditions have sought to bridge the gap between these approaches (Johansson and Herz 2019; Woodman and Bennett 2015). They have argued, among other things, that the transitions experienced by youths cannot be separated from their broader cultural context.

Both traditions have developed rapidly in Western academia, being driven not only by scholars with a serious concern for youth issues but also by society's shift from industrial to post-industrial. Although these studies have evolved dynamically, they have been heavily oriented towards Western society. Such scholars have often associated youths with the "individualization" of post-industrial society, wherein the certainty of industrial society has been replaced by widespread "risks" and "uncertainty" in today's globalized and neo-liberal world (Giddens, Lash, and Beck 1994).

The tendency to use chronological and linear markers, seeing youths as experiencing three major transitions—school to work transitions, domestic transitions, and housing transitions—has been criticized. Amidst the risks, uncertainties, and instabilities of post-industrial society, as well as the changing employment landscape, youths are experiencing fractured or "multiple" transitions (Bradley and Devadason, 2008). Bradley and Devadason explore how, in the United Kingdom, increased demand for higher education has resulted in the diversification of the paths from school to the workplace. Youths experience three individual trajectories before finding stable employment. First, due to the length of their studies, students seek casual employment at bars and restaurants. Second, due to the economic insecurity and instability of modern society, youths exist in a precarious state marked by bouts of employment and unemployment. Third, experiences with transition are no longer communal or uniform, but "individualized" and "differentiated."

Meanwhile, in non-Western societies—particularly the communal ones of Asia, where industrialization has not been as widespread—youths' experiences have differed (Parker and Nilan 2013, p. 148). Through the national/mass education policies implemented for human resource development and their experiences with global youth culture, youths in Asia have been exposed to new job aspirations and global cultural experiences (Nilan and Feixa 2006). This has facilitated the rise of new dreams and desires amongst youths (Naafs and Skelton 2018).

Within the context of changing and insecure employment landscape, nonetheless, achieving the dream job for most youths in Asia is not easy. A study by Kim (2018) revealed that most young people in Korea are no longer

able to dream of their future as it is blocked by “rational judgment” imbued in their mind, which drives them to go for shorter-term goals rather than long-term dreams, which are unrealistic to chase. Based on their study of “Korean Youth Values Survey” data, Kim et al. (2018) found that, in general, contemporary Korean youths have pessimistic outlooks on their future.

Most youths in Southeast Asia perceive education as the surest means of achieving upward mobility and finding formal employment in the public/private sector. Agriculture, long the primary motor of Southeast Asia’s economies, has transformed significantly as new policies have been implemented to provide mass education to improve human resources in the region. Youths dream of finding other work, rather than following in their parents’ footsteps and working in agriculture. At the same time, however, their lengthy studies are not accompanied by transitional employment experiences (in bars and restaurants, for example); instead, their tuition and everyday expenses are covered by their parents. As a result, youths in Asia tend to experience a lengthy transition marked by high levels of risk. The situation faced by young people in rural areas is particularly precarious; due to the length of their studies, they have little experience with farming, and yet employment opportunities outside of that sector remain scarce (White 2016).

Policy debate in response to this issue has included discussion of the Active Labor Market Policy (ALMP). Through a review of the literature, Niño-Zarazúa and Torm (2022, p. 15) find that an average of 5.62% of Indonesian residents participated in the ALMP program per annum. This participation rate is only half that of Vietnam (11.92%), but higher than that of Myanmar (2.34%) and Cambodia (1.22%). In the past decade, Indonesia has made significant innovations, combining the ALMP program with social protection programs such as pre-employment, employment insurance, and job services. However, these programs are administered by different institutions, without any integration, and thus their effect on youths’ transition to the workforce has been minimal.

Broader Context Affecting Youth Transition

In the Indonesian context, three points have drawn significant attention from scholars of youths and the transitions they experience: urbanization, study duration, and the influence of religious and family values (Parker and Nilan 2013; Robinson 2016; White 2016). Urbanization has heavily influenced youths’ lives, as they have migrated to Indonesia’s major cities to continue

their education. Most of Indonesia's schools and universities are located in urban areas, and thus children must be "separated" from their families throughout their studies even as they remain financially reliant on their parents. Most Indonesian families believe that youths must not work while studying, as doing so would distract them from their studies. Part-time and casual work, meanwhile, remains difficult to find. Consequently, most Indonesian youths spend years studying while obtaining minimal work experience; their experiences, thus, differ significantly from those of Western youths who pay tuition independently and work throughout their studies. For instance, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 39% of students in 23 member countries work while studying; rates vary from 15% in Italy to 60% in the Netherlands (OECD 2012). No data is currently available for Indonesia; however, student employment rates are certain to be low.

Furthermore, even when Indonesian youths live apart from their parents, their experiences with individualization are minimal. They remain closely linked with their families, to the point of being monitored by family members while studying in the city (Parker and Nilan 2013). Such close ties are necessary, as they remain financially dependent on their families. Marriage is another important transitional marker amongst Indonesian youths. The term "readiness" is often associated with youths' preparedness for marriage and homeownership. Influenced by religious and family values, Indonesian youths experience more pressure than their Western peers to marry. Premarital sex, conversely, is not a common marker of youth transition in Indonesia. These points are important to consider when exploring the job aspirations and desires of Indonesian youths.

Job aspirations and desires have long been central topics of youth studies in Indonesia. Scholars (e.g., Naafs 2013; Nilan et al. 2016; Parker and Nilan 2013) have shown that most Indonesian youths dream of employment in the formal sector. Although civil servants are not paid well, Indonesian youths wish to work for the state, as it would not only guarantee a regular salary but also opportunities for advancement, a pension, and social prestige.

However, as job opportunities in the private and public sectors are limited, many youths experience unemployment after graduating from university. Scholars (e.g. Aswicahyono, Hill, and Narjoko 2010; Naafs 2013) write that, between 2004 and 2009, Indonesia experienced a significant unemployment crisis. Consequently, the Indonesian government began pushing youths to become entrepreneurs. Similarly, universities began to facilitate entrepreneurship by designing new curricula and incubating

business ideas. However, there has yet to be any official report or academic study of the program's effectiveness.

At the same time, technological advances have significantly transformed the employment landscape. Recent reports from the International Labour Organization (2020) and the World Economic Forum (2019) show a massive shift in the employment landscape in Asia. Where previously many youths sought jobs at multinational corporations, public sector employment, or entrepreneurial opportunities, digital technology has stimulated the rise of new jobs marked by creativity, flexibility, and global outreach. Under President Joko Widodo, the Indonesian government has responded positively to this shift, promoting the country's demographic bonus and facilitating youths' efforts to start their own businesses. At the same time, the president has hired successful youths as his special staff.

Over the past 10 years, the Indonesian government has massively promoted entrepreneurship among the country's youths, seeking to stimulate the growth of the digital and creative economy. However, there have been significant challenges, especially after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's "Pre-Employment Program"—already criticized for a lack of direction and high levels of uncertainty—has been rocked by the economic crisis wrought by the pandemic. Therein lies this study's significance, as it explores the extent to which the pandemic has hindered youths' transition from school to work as well as the creative means through which youths have navigated these trying times.

Employability and Resilience

In this research, we looked particularly at the dimension of employability and resilience of fresh graduates. The concept of employability has been widely discussed by scholars and policy analysts within the context of employment and labor absorption (e.g. Artes, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne 2017; Clarke 2018; Guilbert et al. 2016). Briefly, employability is defined in such studies as the personal capability and attributes that contribute to individuals' ability to obtain their desired jobs. At the same time, however, employability cannot simply be reduced to individuals' personal capacity and achievements; it involves individuals' broader environment—their socio-political context, the labor market situation, and the role of capital. This article, thus, will consider such contextual information (cf. McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Moreau and Leathwood 2006).

Meanwhile, the concept of resilience has been closely associated with the uncertainties and vulnerabilities faced by youths during transitional periods (e.g. van Breda and Theron 2018; Burt and Paysnick 2012; S4YE 2021). In this study, referring to S4YE (2021, p. 8), we explore resilience and its involvement in youths' ability to adapt and identify alternative strategies to ensure their continued survival and advancement.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social and physical distancing policies implemented to mitigate its effects, quantitative data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms. As its loci, this study took 16 universities in four Indonesian cities, namely Makassar, Medan, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta. These cities were selected for their geographic representativeness; together, they represented eastern, central, and western Indonesia, as well as Java and other islands. In each city, four institutions were selected to represent the four types of higher education in Indonesia: state, private, religious, and pedagogic (i.e., for teachers). Institutions designed to meet the needs of civil servants were excluded, as graduates utilize different channels and experience distinctive dynamics.

Quantitative Approach

(1) Samples and Sampling Technique

A sample was selected using quota purposive sampling, with the population being youths who graduated from Indonesian institutions in 2019 or 2020. A total of 800 respondents were selected, 50 from each university (25 men and 25 women). Although this study was conducted online, enumerators were retained in each city to identify and select respondents to ensure that quotas were met.

(2) Variables, Indicators, and Measurement

This study employs three concepts: employability, civic skills, and resilience. Employability was measured based on respondents' employment status when the survey was conducted (Humburg, Van der Velden, and Verhagen 2013; Weinert et al. 2001). Employability was determined, among other things, by

individual characteristics such as personal capacity (including foreign language fluency and technological literacy), workplace exposure (including internship and work experiences), and educational background (including discipline and grade point average). The concept of civic skills, meanwhile, involved explanatory variables and intervening variables. These included respondents' participation in school-based activities such as campus political organizations, hobby groups, extracurricular activities, and religious organizations (Colby et al. 2003). Resilience, meanwhile, was used to understand how graduates have adapted to the current crisis. It involved three criteria: the ability to improve technological literacy, the ability to expand social networks, and the ability to develop the skills demanded by the job market.

(3) Data Processing and Analysis

Data collected through Google Forms was processed using STATA 16, through which the researchers ensured that missing and erroneous data were removed. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive and inferential approach. Descriptive statistics were used to understand the distribution of data, while inferential statistics were used to investigate the correlation between variables.

Qualitative Approach

Meanwhile, qualitative data were collected using in-depth interviews that were mediated using WhatsApp. This method was chosen due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of which interpersonal interactions were strictly limited. For this study, 16 informants were interviewed, one from each of the 16 institutions chosen for this study. These interviews were conducted to explore fresh graduates' experiences in greater detail than possible with an online survey. Interviews were conducted between September and October 2020.

In August and September 2021, we conducted online focus group discussions with respondents from 8 of the institutions chosen for this research. Three participants were chosen from each institution with the assistance of local research assistants, who identified potential candidates who were later filtered by discipline, social activities, and demographic characteristics. These 24 respondents were divided into four focus groups, which were used to complement the data collected through surveys and online interviews. All names of the informants written in this paper are pseudo names to ensure

their privacy and confidentiality.

Findings

The online survey involved 800 fresh graduates (youths who had graduated less than two years previous), with men and women represented equally. Of these respondents, 387 (48.38%) indicated that they were currently employed and 413 (51.62%) indicated that they were unemployed when the survey was conducted. Meanwhile, only three of the 16 informants interviewed indicated that they had entered the workforce after graduation. One informant said that, after completing her studies, she had found employment as a casual teacher in a junior high school. However, she stated that her wages in this position were extremely low and insufficient for independent living; she still desired a position as a state-employed teacher. Another informant indicated that, after he graduated with a degree in management, he had become a member of the administrative staff at an e-commerce company. Although he still desired a civil servant position, he indicated that his current position was in-line with his educational background. Finally, the third informant explained that he had become casually employed as a support staff member at his alma mater—but did not consider this his final career.

Meanwhile, fresh graduates who had yet to find employment described internship as a positive activity, one through which they were able to improve their personal capacity and find gainful employment. Two informants, Yustia and Amera, explained that they had found internships that built upon their educational backgrounds. Yustia had found an internship at a prominent legal aid center in Makassar, which was well suited to her law degree. Amera, who had graduated with a degree in English literature, found an internship of writing English-language content for an online media platform. Amera argued that this position would help her advance her dreams.

What have fresh graduates done to find employment amidst the mobility limits imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic? Most respondents (729, 91.12%) expanded their social networks. This strategy was facilitated by advances in communication technology, as well as broader access to cellular phones, laptops, and personal computers. Although they were not able to interact with others directly, they were able to use these gadgets to keep in touch with their friends and make new contacts.

Another strategy used by fresh graduates to weather the crisis was improving their technological literacy, as indicated by 88.88% of respondents.

This decision was also influenced by society's increased reliance on and access to digital technology. Finally, 484 respondents (60.50%) sought to develop new skills in accordance with market demands.

Variables Associated with Employability

What variables influence the employability of fresh graduates? Chi-square testing, the results of which are shown in Table 1, shows that three variables are associated with fresh graduates' employability: work experience, internship experience, and discipline. The X^2 value for work experience and employability is 89.9037, with a p-value of 0.0001 (above the significance threshold of 0.05). As such, fresh graduates with previous work experience have higher levels of employability than those without any prior experience.

Of fresh graduates who had already found employment, many had entered the workforce while still enrolled in tertiary education, earning a minimum wage for their work. Most had found work through their social networks on campus, including their friends, peers, and lecturers. Informants

TABLE 1
CHI SQUARE TEST ON CROSS-VARIABLES ASSOCIATIONS (N=800)

Concepts	Variables	Employability	
		Main activity at the time of the survey (1=employed; 0=unemployed/not working)	
		X^2 (Chi square)	P-Value
Personal capacity	English proficiency (1=good; 0=poor)	0.5801	0.446
	Technological literacy (1=good; 0=poor)	0.7649	0.382
Workplace exposure	Work experience (1=yes; 0=none)	89.9037	0.0001
	Internship experience (1=yes; 0=none)	6.3825	0.012
Educational background	Discipline (1=exact sciences; 0=social sciences)	6.7468	0.009
	GPA (1=cum laude; 0=not cum laude)	1.7906	0.181

narrated that, through their workplace activities, they learned the value of hard work and money, reduced their financial reliance on their parents, and established social networks.

Meanwhile, chi-square testing of the link between internship experience and employability produced an X^2 value of 6.3825 and a p-value of 0.012, above the significance threshold of 0.05. As such, fresh graduates who had interned during their studies had higher levels of employability, as indicated by their ability to find gainful employment after graduation. Internship opportunities may be more common for students, as host organizations are not burdened by the need to pay wages. However, few informants indicated that they interned while enrolled in higher education. Some only began their internships after graduation.

... here, I'm interning as a journalist, a content writer. Here, I write and make articles that reflect the values of the company and follow the themes provided. I think that this experience is something I can put on my resume when I apply for work in the publishing industry... (Aliza, a fresh graduate in Surabaya)

Informants indicated that, although internship did not guarantee access to employment in their field of interest, it provided them with an understanding of the duties involved and gave them a foot in the door.

For the third variable, discipline, chi-square testing produced an X^2 value of 6.7468 and a p-value of 0.009, higher than the significance threshold of 0.05. Survey data indicated that fresh graduates with a background in the social sciences had higher employability than their fellows with a background in the exact sciences. Further research found that these disciplines are perceived as more relevant and beneficial for mercantile employment and entrepreneurial activities, which require management and communication skills—both of which are cornerstones of the social sciences. We assume that, as entrepreneurship and sales activities are more common in Indonesia than manufacturing and formal service activities, more employment opportunities are available. Consequently, fresh graduates from these disciplines can transition to the workplace more readily and apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world situations.

... now I'm an entrepreneur. In searching for clients or developing my rapport with customers, I can apply some of the lessons I learned in school. For example, marketing communication and organizational communication

... (Lisa, a fresh graduate in Surabaya, Indonesia)

Graduates of prestigious universities indicated that, despite the reputations of their alma maters, they received no special dispensations from potential employers. One graduate of a prominent state university provides an example of these experiences.

... I tried submitting my resume everywhere, but I got no calls. You could say that the prominence of my campus has not helped me find work (Doni, a fresh graduate in Yogyakarta)

In this regard, we assume that students who graduated in 2019/2020 had minimal employability. They had few opportunities to find work, let alone enter the career of their dreams. After the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020 and public mobility was limited drastically, fewer job offers were posted and entrepreneurial opportunities were reduced.

How Have Indonesia's Fresh Graduates Adjusted in This Time of Crisis?

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia's fresh graduates had difficulty finding work. This was only exacerbated by the pandemic. All 16 of the informants interviewed indicated that they sought to navigate the transition through activities that, while unpaid, were nevertheless useful for advancing their social visions. They sought to maximize their potential to ensure their continued ability to weather the crisis. It is this adaptability that we describe as resilience.

Their approaches to adaptation have included, first, accepting jobs while still recognizing that these opportunities are temporary, low-paying, and freelance. Some acted as members of the village-level elections commission, freelance graphic designers and lay out designers, casual teachers, and casual field workers for small mining projects.

Second, fresh graduates participated in positive activities, even when these activities did not earn them any money. Putri, who graduated from a teachers college in Yogyakarta after receiving a government scholarship, decided to return to her home village and restart the Qur'anic Education Center that had closed some time previously. At the same time, she attempted to facilitate youth activities in the village. She stated that, while waiting for the opportunity to teach, she was keeping herself busy with social activities and helping her parents in the farming fields.

Third, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented the “Pre-Employment Program” to help job seekers participate in online courses and access financial incentives (US\$40/month for three months). Discussions with informants indicated that they were aware of the program and had attempted to register. Most, however, had not succeeded. Those who registered successfully, however, were able to enjoy its benefits and receive some financial support.

In a broader perspective, the widespread of the non-linear and non-uniform youths' transition to the workforce is due to the combination of fragile labor market in large informal employment, ineffective labor market intervention and a scattered social protection. Within this regard, the Indonesian government has implemented some Active Labor Market Policy programs, combined with social protection, but these are delivered by different ministries and agencies that cannot generate effective labor market intervention. The fact that they do not publish evaluation reports suggests the ineffectiveness of such programs.

Binary logistic regression was used to identify the correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variables that constitute adaptability. These are shown in the table and discussion below.

For the ability to adapt to a crisis by improving one's technological capacity, a correlation was identified for two variables: technological ability and participation in organizational and extracurricular activities. Controlling for other variables, fresh graduates with high levels of technological literacy were three times more likely to adapt by improving their competencies. Intan, a communication sciences graduate, and Andi, a graduate from a faculty of education in Surabaya, noted that they had obtained a basic understanding of digital and internet technology through their formal studies. As companies created digital spaces such as Ruang Guru during the pandemic, they decided to improve their skills and fill their spare time by studying available resources, consulting with friends, and communicating with the developers of information technology projects. Doni, who graduated from a prominent university in Yogyakarta, stated that, although he hoped to work for the government, he had an interest in photography. As such, while waiting for an opportunity to register for the civil service, he cultivated his photography and media editing skills while working with peers. He had already earned a little money from his hobby.

The stories of Intan, Andi, and Doni show how the skills developed by students during their studies provided them with capital and inspiration after graduating. During the current crisis, with job opportunities scarce, they

relied and capitalized on their particular knowledge and skills to earn a livelihood. They recognized that, where their skills were lacking, they needed to better themselves.

Similarly, fresh graduates with prior experience in organized and extracurricular activities were twice as likely to improve their technological literacy than those without any such experience. In Indonesia, such organized and extracurricular activities—commonly known as “student activity units” (*unit kegiatan mahasiswa*, UKM)—do not intrinsically involve technology. However, engagement in these activities still provided graduates with real-life experience with social activities and organizational management. Roby, a political science graduate from Medan, spent a year earning money as a graphic designer. He normally accepted small assignments from his peers and former lecturers. Having graduated with a political science degree, he had difficulty finding a job that was suited to his educational background. Fortunately, as a student, he had been active in an Islamic studies group, where he had worked with the public relations division to design pamphlets and publications. In this position, he learned to use graphic design software, never expecting that it would help him in the future.

Roby's story highlights the significance of organizational experience, including extracurricular activities. Through these activities, youths are exposed to organizational management and develop important skills. They also have the opportunity to expand their networks, which indirectly provides them with exposure, inspiration, and social capital.

For the second strategy, two variables were found to influence graduates' choice to expand their social networks: internship experience and participation in extracurricular activities/organizations. Graduates who had interned during their studies or who had participated in extracurricular activities/organizations were twice as likely as their peers to expand their social networks to weather the current crisis. We assume that, through these internship and organizational experiences, students have the opportunity to meet others and associate with diverse communities.

Many informants who had been involved in extracurricular organizations sought to expand their networks to find work or entrepreneurial activities. Dita, a fresh graduate in Makassar who had prior experience with a student movement, was sometimes contracted by Jakarta-based survey organizations to act as a field surveyor. She learned of these opportunities through her alumni networks. Meanwhile, in Medan, Dini found employment with a philanthropic organization through the social networks that she had established through her campus *da'wah* (Islam outreach) organization.

These experiences have not been entirely unique to the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, several of these strategies were already used by youths to navigate transitional periods. They have considered these strategies useful for obtaining information on employment opportunities, self-actualization in society, and confidence-building. New during the COVID-19 pandemic are fresh graduates' use of web-based job-matching like Adobe Stock, Shutterstock, and Freepik to find freelance opportunities. However, such employment is perceived as short-term transitional/side jobs.

Finally, six variables were found to be correlated with fresh graduates' decision to develop the skills demanded by the market. Controlling for other variables, male graduates were one and a half times as likely to develop the skills demanded by the market. This decision was also influenced by GPA, technological literacy, participation in extracurricular activities, and participation in religious organizations.

Interestingly, male graduates were more likely to develop their skills than their female peers. Although we have yet to ascertain the reason for this trend, our research showed that male graduates greatly desired to become financially independent of their parents and cultivate their long-term career prospects. Such tendencies, certainly, were also exhibited by female graduates; however, they were more likely to consider the idea of returning to their parents. This may reflect the traditional gender constructs of Indonesian society, wherein men are expected to become their families' main breadwinners and women are associated more strongly with childcare and domestic labor (Nilan 2008; Smith-Hefner 2005, 2007).

Women overtaking men in school enrolment has also been common in both developed and developing countries (Diprete and Buchmann 2006; Goldin 2006; Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko 2006). East Asian countries like Japan, Korea, and Taiwan had begun to experience that from late 1980s (Chang 2019). Why does it happen even though women's participation in labor market remains lower than that of men? Some scholars (e.g. Chang 2019; Ge 2011; Goldin 2006; Jacob 2002) saw there to be an incentive among young women to achieve higher education—one of these being an expectation to find a husband who is also highly educated. It has been a common belief that men with high levels of education tend to acquire jobs with higher salary or income. Therefore, women who marry these men will enjoy the living standards they achieve. This is a common story in Indonesia. Many highly educated young women become housewives of husbands with relatively high incomes. These women had found such a social opportunity through their university education, although they do not work after their

studies.

From an economic perspective, with higher education perceived as an important means of developing human capital, this situation is far from ideal. Statistics from the Directorate General of Higher Education (2020) show that 1,213,815 (56.10%) of Indonesia's tertiary students are women, while only 949,866 (43.90%) are men. If these enrollment figures are not reflected in labor absorption rates, the resulting inequality will reduce productivity and stymie welfare development efforts. The ILO notes that, as of 2021, Indonesia is experiencing a gender gap of 28 percentage points; while 81.7% of men are employed, only 53.7% of women are involved in the workforce (ILO 2021).

Finally, graduates with prior internship experience were twice as likely to cultivate the skills demanded by the market. Perhaps these internships prepared them for the workforce by providing them with an understanding of the skills required. Only recently, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture implemented new strategies to boost the employability of university graduates by providing a very spacious learning opportunity outside the regular teaching model called MBKM (*Merdeka Belajar, Kampus Merdeka* or Free Learning, Free Campus).¹ This program includes internships at government- and non-government enterprises and institutions and involvement in social projects (both on- and off-campus). It is hoped that, through such exposure, students will be more inclined to develop clear visions for their futures and be agile and adaptive in their efforts to enter the workplace. Nevertheless, as this program is still in its early stages, its effectiveness cannot readily be evaluated.

Conclusion

This article has shown that most fresh graduates have experienced significant difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fewer than half of respondents, all of whom graduated between 2019 and 2020, had found employment. Even then, most fresh graduates indicated that their current job was not the one they desired. They instead sought to continuously adapt themselves through meaningful activities, be they social, religious, or self-developmental. Such strategies have not been entirely limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to limited employment opportunities in the formal sector, many youths have relied on social networks to seek employment, develop businesses, and

¹ See <https://kampusmerdeka.kemdikbud.go.id/>

actualize themselves in society—be it through gainful employment or through unpaid activities.

The experiences of Indonesian youths, as discussed in this article, show that it is insufficient to consider only economic dimensions when ascertaining the employability of youths. Most scholars and policy analysts who have written about employment issues and employability have relied too heavily on statistics and fixed categories (employed/unemployed, income). This study has provided a more grounded perspective, one that considers the individual trajectories of fresh graduates as well as their particular socioeconomic contexts.

Within a broader academic context, this article has enriched the literature on youth transition by showing that the process is neither linear nor uniform. As such, it supports the zones of liminality offered by Furlong (2019) and fractured transitions proposed by Bradley and Devadason (2008). These transitional experiences reflect the temporariness of everyday life, wherein individuals must rely on what Lippényi (2019) describes as “contingent work.” There has been a shift from traditional full-time and life-long employment to an employment landscape wherein workers have far looser bonds to their workplaces and social settings, as they are more likely to find employment elsewhere within the flexible labor market. Unlike previous studies, we have shown that non-economic factors considerably and significantly influence youths’ resilience and their ability to adapt to crises.

(Submitted: April 5, 2022; Revised: January 25, 2023; Accepted: May 15, 2023)

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