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Exploring Subjective Employability Outcomes Influenced by Curriculum and Personal Factors in the Cambodian Context

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how curriculum quality and personal factors shape TESOL students' and graduates' perceptions of their employability. The researcher has adopted a constructivist approach to analyse 37 semi-structured interviews with current students and alumni from a four-year TESOL undergraduate program at a private Cambodian university. The findings reveal that curriculum factors, such as content relevance, the balance between teaching theory and practice, and instructional quality, significantly impacted graduates' confidence and employability. Practical experiences, including teaching practicum and micro-teaching, were crucial in enhancing self-efficacy and job readiness, while many participants found theoretical courses irrelevant to their careers. Personal factors, such as self-efficacy, motivation, social capital, and resilience, further influenced subjective employability outcomes. Graduates with higher self-confidence were more proactive in pursuing jobs, while strong networks led to faster employment. This study contributes to the TESOL employability literature and offers actionable insights for improving curriculum design, student support, and career services. Recommendations include more practical learning opportunities, better mentorship and networking, and fostering a growth mindset to enhance resilience and adaptability in graduates.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In higher education, the quality of curriculum has been recognised as a decisive factor influencing graduates' employability perceptions. A curriculum that integrates theoretical knowledge, practical skill development, and industry-relevant competencies is more likely to equip graduates for labour market success [1], [2]. In TESOL contexts, this often includes not only linguistic proficiency but also pedagogical competence, cross-cultural communication skills, and adaptability to diverse teaching environments [3], [4].

English proficiency remains foundational for employability in enhancing both professional communication and self-confidence [5]. Graduates with strong language skills

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are more competitive in the education sector and beyond, particularly in economies where English functions as a key driver for internationalisation and economic growth [6]. Equally important to the English proficiency is teaching competence, as it is generally acquired through coursework, microteaching, and supervised practicum, which has been shown to increase graduates' perceptions of job readiness and market competitiveness [7], [8].

Moreover, faculty expertise and mentorship are frequently linked to students' career preparedness. Effective lecturers or professors serve as both role models and sources of professional guidance [9], [10]. Practicum experiences bridge theoretical learning and real-world applications and provide opportunities for graduates to develop instructional skills, classroom management, and assessment literacy [11], [12]. Collaborative learning activities, such as peer-teaching, further strengthen communication, teamwork, and reflective practice—attributes linked to career optimism and long-term employability [13].

Besides curriculum design, personal factors significantly influence how graduates assess their employability. Self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one's ability to perform professional tasks, has a well-documented positive relationship with career decision-making, persistence in job search, and adaptation to workplace challenges [14], [15]. High self-efficacy can buffer against the effects of skill gaps or labour market uncertainty [16].

More than that, outcome expectations, encompassing anticipated financial, social, and personal rewards, play an important role in shaping career motivation and planning [17]. Similarly, adaptability, which encompasses flexibility, resilience, and proactive learning, enables graduates to navigate evolving job requirements and seize emerging opportunities [18], [19].

Social capital, developed through academic networks, internships, and professional associations, facilitates job search success and career advancement [20], [21]. In competitive labour markets, networks can provide access to information, referrals, and hidden job opportunities that formal qualifications alone may not secure [22].

Therefore, curriculum quality and personal factors jointly influence subjective employability outcomes, including job satisfaction, income expectations, perceived competitiveness, and career optimism. Effective TESOL programs integrate these dimensions by embedding employability-oriented skills in their curricula while also fostering personal attributes that enhance graduates' capacity to navigate complex career landscapes [23]–[25].

To understand how graduates navigate the transition from academic study to professional employment requires examining both the structural quality of the curriculum they experience and the personal attributes they bring to their career journey. This study, therefore, explores, first, how students and graduates perceive curriculum quality and the ways these perceptions relate to their subjective employability outcomes, and second, how personal factors shape and influence these same employment perceptions.

Thus, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do students and graduates perceive the quality of the curriculum, and how do these perceptions relate to their subjective employability outcomes?
2. How do personal factors influence students' and graduates' subjective employment outcomes?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that employability perceptions are socially and individually constructed through lived experiences [26]. Within this paradigm, the researcher drew on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) [15] and related employability scholarship [18], [19], [22] to conceptualise how curriculum and personal factors interact.

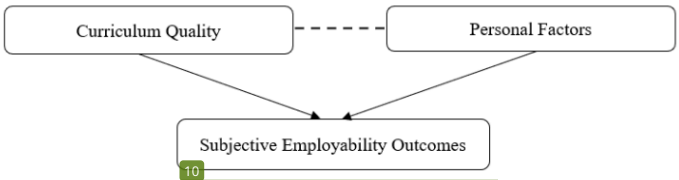

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The framework, in Figure 1, illustrates two major domains: (1) students' and graduates' perceptions of the overall TESOL curriculum quality, and (2) personal factors that shape career development.

Both domains are theorised to directly influence subjective employability outcomes, which include readiness for work, perceived competitiveness, career optimism, and satisfaction [22], [23]. In addition, personal factors may moderate curriculum effects: for instance, students with higher self-efficacy and stronger networks may translate the same curriculum experience into more favourable employability perceptions.

Thus, this theoretical framework integrates insights from theory and context to guide the study's research questions and analysis.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore students' and graduates' perceptions of curriculum quality and personal factors influencing their subjective employability outcomes. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for capturing participants' lived experiences, more complex meanings, and contextualised perspectives [26], [27]. By employing in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study was able to generate rich data that aligned with the research questions, which sought to understand not only what participants perceived but also how and why these perceptions influenced their career trajectories. As Patton [28] emphasises, qualitative research provides flexibility and depth, which enables the researcher to probe emergent themes while remaining grounded in participants' voices.

3.2 Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide in-depth insights into the research questions. The target group comprised Cambodian students and graduates from the Bachelor of Arts in Education (B.A-Ed) in

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Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program at a private Cambodian university. This program delivers its curriculum entirely in English and is taught by both local and international faculty members from the foundation year through to graduation. As part of their training, students are required to complete a teaching practicum at an Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL), which serves as a major requirement to support their professional preparedness.

Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate given its emphasis on selecting information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon under study [29]. In total, 37 participants were recruited to ensure variation in gender, age, employment field, and study completion years, thereby maximising the diversity of perspectives.

The demographic profile of the participants reflected a diverse yet TESOL-oriented group. The majority were between 24 and 29 years of age, with the youngest participant aged 24 and the oldest 34, which indicates that most were in the early stages of their professional careers. Gender distribution was nearly balanced, with females slightly outnumbering males. Employment fields revealed a strong dominance of TESOL, as over half of the participants were engaged as teachers of English or in TESOL-related roles. In contrast, others combined TESOL with broader professional experiences in education, banking, business, government, finance, and freelancing. Notably, some participants occupied multiple roles, such as Buddhist monks who simultaneously taught English and professionals who integrated TESOL with administrative or technical responsibilities.

Entry and graduation years ranged from 2014 to 2025, with most participants completing their studies between 2018 and 2024, though a few extended their study periods due to suspension. Collectively, these data highlight both the centrality of TESOL in shaping participants' career trajectories and the expanding applicability of TESOL graduates across interdisciplinary fields.

3.3 Instrument

The semi-structured interview protocol for this study consisted of three introductory questions followed by thirteen main questions. The protocol was first reviewed and formally approved by all five experts of the dissertation committee panel to ensure alignment with the research objectives. After the approval, the instrument underwent a pilot phase with four recent graduates from the TESOL program. This piloting process aimed to evaluate the clarity of the questions, the appropriateness of the language, and the sensitivity of wording to avoid potential sources of misunderstanding or bias. To achieve this, the study employed the cognitive interviewing technique proposed by Willis [30], which emphasises examining how respondents comprehend, process, and respond to questions during pretesting. Feedback from the pilot participants provided insights into question interpretation, wording effectiveness, and potential ambiguities. Based on these findings, the interview questions were subsequently revised, refined, and finalised to enhance validity, ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness, and improve the overall quality of data collection.

3.4 Data Collection

Participants were contacted through Telegram, a platform widely used among Cambodian students and graduates for professional and academic communication. Individual interviews were then conducted via Microsoft Teams, which was both accessible and convenient during the data collection period. Each participant was provided with an informed consent form and a verbal explanation of the study's purpose prior to participation. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' responses.

The data collection spanned two months to accommodate flexibility in scheduling and ensure that participants' availability was respected. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes since there was variation in the depth of responses of individual participants. This duration consisted of best practices for semi-structured interviews, which recommend sufficient time to build rapport and encourage reflective responses without causing fatigue [31].

3.5 Data Analysis

The researcher aimed to bring participants' voices into the findings while keeping the narrative focused. Instead of quoting all 37 participants, the researcher selected excerpts that best illustrated each subtheme, highlighted important contrasts including deviant/negative cases, and demonstrated thematic saturation. This approach follows qualitative reporting conventions in which rigour is evidenced through breadth, variation, and saturation rather than exhaustive quotation of every voice [32]–[35]. To make these selections, coded segments were retrieved and filtered using criteria such as relevance to the subtheme, clarity of expression, representation across cohorts/gender, and inclusion of at least one counter-voice where feasible. Field notes were consulted to preserve context and to strengthen the interpretation of divergent cases.

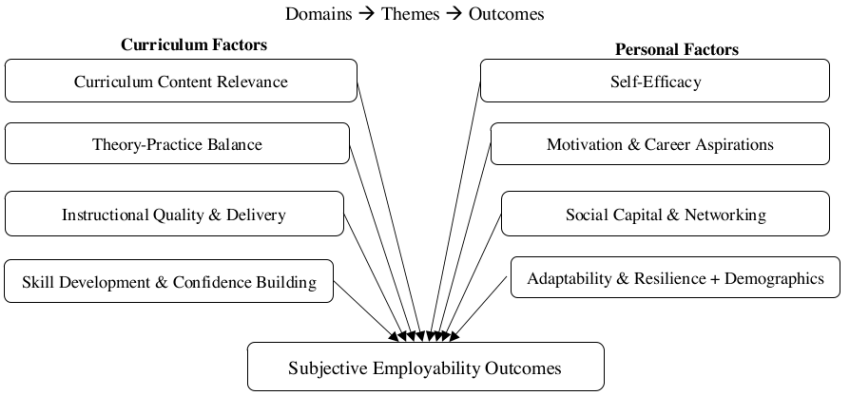

Figure 2. Thematic Map of Emerged Themes from the Interview Analysis

Figure 2 provides an analytic audit trail from coded segments to final themes. After first-cycle open coding (line-by-line) and second-cycle categorisation/axial coding, codes were clustered into conceptually related categories, which were then integrated into themes following an iterative, constant-comparison process. The map displays two analytic domains aligned with the research questions: Curriculum Factors (left) and Personal Factors (right). Within each domain, the rounded boxes represent the final themes that survived multiple rounds of refinement (merging, renaming, and boundary testing against negative cases and outliers). Arrows converge on Subjective Employability Outcomes to indicate the interpretive linkage derived from the analysis (i.e., how participants narrated influences on perceived readiness, competitiveness, optimism, income expectations, and satisfaction). The arrows should be read as analytic pathways rather than causal estimates.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards in educational research. Participants were assured of anonymity, and identifiers were replaced with codes (e.g., G1–G37) to protect confidentiality. Consent was obtained in both written and verbal forms to guarantee participants' autonomy and voluntary participation. Importantly, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee panel of the university. Additionally, the interview questions were piloted to check whether any bias and sensitive questions could hurt participants' feelings unintentionally.

4. RESULTS

The analysis has emerged a clear thematic structure for the factors influencing TESOL students' and graduates' perceived employability as illustrated in Figure 2. Curriculum and personal factors are described along with their subthemes as follows:

4.1 Curriculum Quality Perceptions and Employability Outcomes

4.1.1 Relevance of Curriculum Content

Most graduates praised the core TESOL courses, especially in years 3 and 4, for imparting valuable teaching knowledge. For example, one graduate noted that "the fourth year was useful – courses like classroom assessment, teaching methodology, and lesson planning" (G2). These courses were seen as directly applicable to teaching jobs and gave participants confidence in their professional skills. Another participant similarly felt "the TESOL program has prepared me very well. It gave me a strong foundation in teaching methods, lesson planning, and helped me build confidence in teaching" (G29), underscoring how relevant coursework bolstered her self-assurance entering the workforce. In contrast, many participants were critical of mandatory courses perceived as unrelated to their field. Several graduates "lost motivation" in classes like college algebra, political science, or Khmer history that seemed "not related and just repetitive" (G2). One interviewee admitted, "I asked myself why teaching English is related to math. I have never applied algebra in my teaching" (G1), questioning why such requirements existed in the curriculum. Another recalled being baffled by having to study political science as a TESOL major, stating, "I do not know why TESOL students have to learn politics" (G30). In one extreme case, a participant described how a heavily technical computer course in

the foundation year upset her so much that "after I went home, I cried… I wanted to quit or change the university" (G30). These sentiments highlight a common perception that extraneous or outdated content diluted the curriculum's quality and, at times, even undermined students' morale. There were a few divergent perspectives – notably, one graduate (G11) appreciated the broad "general knowledge" gained from the foundation year courses in history, ethics, and other subjects, viewing them as beneficial for overall education. However, the majority opinion was that the curriculum needed tighter alignment with the TESOL field and that practical teaching needs to support graduates' employability fully.

4.1.2 Practical Preparation versus Theory

The imbalance between theoretical knowledge and practical training is another prominent theme. Participants consistently reported that the program was "mostly theoretical, with not really much practical" preparation for TESOL learners (G1). Participants valued learning linguistics and pedagogy theory provided by the school, but felt that hands-on teaching experience was lacking. One graduate explained that "what we learn at school sometimes does not really match the real situations", such as rigid lesson plan formats that "do not reflect real classrooms" (G1). The need for more practicum, internships, or real classroom exposure came up in many interviews. "All the courses… should provide more practical assignments or projects. Do not focus only on theories," one participant urged (G7), a sentiment echoed across the group. Several graduates suggested incorporating micro-teaching sessions, classroom simulations, or earlier practicum opportunities into the curriculum. For instance, a recent alumna recommended "more internship and practicum opportunities during the study. It should focus more on practical applications to prepare students to be ready" (G29). Those who did have a practicum or teaching practice as part of their program described it as transformative. One interviewee shared that he had initial doubts about his teaching readiness, but "after the practicum I feel my confidence has grown… it was a turning point in helping me trust my own teaching abilities" (G10). This illustrates how practical experience bridged the gap between theory and practice, enhancing graduates' self-efficacy in the job market. Overall, participants felt that a stronger practical component in the curriculum would improve alignment with real-world teaching demands and thus boost their subjective employability (in terms of feeling truly prepared and confident to step into jobs).

4.1.3 Quality of Instruction and Delivery

The teaching quality and delivery methods within the program also shaped students' perceptions of curriculum effectiveness. Many participants appreciated the dedicated and inspiring faculty. Learning from experienced professors was highlighted as a positive influence. For example, one graduate fondly recalled observing a professor's "very weird but interesting" teaching style and said, "Now I apply his style with my students" (G1), showing how engaging instructors became role models and enriched the learning experience. However, others encountered less engaging teaching approaches, which they felt diminished the curriculum's impact. A recurring complaint was that some

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professors were overly didactic or disengaged – "some professors just provide [documents] and [tell us to] do the assignment… The professors were not active in class. The students did not learn much" (G7). Another student noted that certain lecturers would "just drop slides and answer the questions" without interactive pedagogy (G2) and pointed to inadequate classroom resources (like "old… equipment" or projectors) that made learning less effective. Such experiences led participants to call for improvements in course delivery, suggesting that instructors include more interactive, student-centred techniques and up-to-date teaching aids. The organisation of the program itself also came under criticism in some cases – for example, having courses scattered across multiple distant campuses in one day created logistical stress ("I had to spend much on tuk-tuks to travel to South, TK, and West campuses in one day", noted one graduate who was also a former monk, G1). While a structural issue, it affected how students perceived the supportiveness of the institution. On a more positive note, institutional support outside the classroom – such as academic clubs and extra-curricular activities – was valued when available. Some participants mentioned that the university had created a teaching club and a public speaking club, which provided opportunities for practice and peer learning (G2, G3). One particularly proactive graduate (G7) was "actively involved in public speaking and leadership clubs" and "learned a lot… it builds my soft skills," though he lamented that many peers ignored volunteer activities as "useless" since they were unpaid. He believed the institution should do more to encourage student participation in such projects: "If PUC is open-minded to involve students in… volunteer work, it is great for them to explore and understand the advantages" (G7). These accounts suggest that effective teaching practices and enriched learning environments (through engaging faculty, practical projects, and co-curricular opportunities) significantly enhanced students' skill development and optimism about their careers. Conversely, uninspired teaching and poor program organisation could diminish the perceived quality of the curriculum, thereby weakening graduates' confidence in their readiness for employment.

4.1.4 Skill Development and Confidence Building

Participants' reflections indicate that a quality curriculum contributes to a broad set of professional skills and personal development, which in turn influence subjective employability outcomes like confidence and career optimism. Many interviewees reported that their TESOL program helped them acquire both "hard skills" and "soft skills" needed for the workplace (G29). On the technical side, graduates gained language proficiency, lesson planning techniques, and assessment strategies, while on the personal side, they developed traits like communication, critical thinking, and leadership. For example, methodology courses not only taught practical teaching techniques but also gave students tools (like games and activities) that they later applied in their classrooms (G29). Numerous participants emphasised how frequent presentations, group projects, and other coursework requirements improved their confidence and communication abilities. "All the courses have presentations all the time. That is why I like PUC and never regret being a student there," one alumna explained, crediting repeated presentations for making her a more self-assured speaker (G30). Another graduate described how leading a group project

for the first time taught him that "being a teacher is being a leader," an experience that boosted his leadership skills and confidence (G1). In addition, specific courses like Character Building or personal growth seminars were cited as influential in shaping students' attitudes and values. One participant noted that a character education class "shocked my heart" and instilled the idea that "teaching is not just about teaching but also about morality" (G1), reflecting growth in his ethical and professional outlook. These examples show that beyond imparting academic knowledge, the curriculum – when effectively delivered – played a critical role in building self-confidence, professionalism, and a proactive mindset in graduates. Those outcomes are key components of subjective employability; indeed, participants who felt they had grown in skills and confidence during the program were more likely to rate themselves highly in terms of job readiness and to approach the labour market with optimism. Nonetheless, it was clear that these positive outcomes were strongest when the curriculum was engaging and applied. Graduates who experienced gaps in practical training or poor teaching reported having to gain certain skills after university (through on-the-job learning or personal effort) before they felt truly confident. In summary, the quality of the curriculum – in content, delivery, and opportunities for skill-building – was directly linked by participants to their sense of preparedness and competitiveness in the job market. A curriculum rich in relevant, applied learning experiences tended to produce more confident and employable graduates, whereas curricular shortcomings (irrelevant courses, lack of practice, uninspired teaching) sometimes left students feeling underprepared or needing to seek additional development on their own.

4.2 Personal Factors Influencing Subjective Employment Outcomes

4.2.1 Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy

Apart from curricular influences, personal self-efficacy emerged as a crucial factor shaping how students and graduates navigated their early careers. There was considerable variation in how confidently individuals approached job searching and work tasks. Some participants were very self-assured – for instance, one graduate said he had "high confidence" in his ability to find a job after graduation (G1), and others rated their own skills quite positively (several gave themselves 8 or 9 out of 10 in work ability). This confidence often stemmed from a combination of education and prior experiences. One interviewee attributed his self-assurance to leadership roles he had taken on even in small jobs, remarking that "trusting myself helps me do my job well" (G7).

On the other hand, many described initial anxiety in transitioning from university to employment. A recent graduate who lacked prior job experience admitted, "I felt nervous. I only had about 50% trust in myself" when she first started her job search (G28). Similarly, another student recalled being only "50/50" confident about finding a job because he feared his lack of experience would hold him back (G3). These candid reflections show how self-confidence can be a fragile but pivotal personal factor: those with higher self-efficacy tended to pursue opportunities and present themselves well to employers proactively, whereas those with lower confidence often needed external validation or experience (such as completing a practicum or getting an initial job) to build trust in their

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own capabilities. Over time, most participants reported growth in confidence – often once they secured a position or overcame early challenges – but the starting level of self-efficacy influenced how stressful or smooth their entry into the workforce felt. It is evident that subjective employability outcomes (like feeling employable and competent) are partly a reflection of this internal factor: the more an individual believes in their own abilities, the more positively they view their career prospects.

4.2.2 Motivation and Career Aspirations

Participants' personal motivations and career goals shaped both their educational experience and their interpretation of post-graduation outcomes. For some, choosing TESOL was driven by a passion for teaching or English, which sustained their engagement throughout the program. For example, one graduate entered the program simply because "I love English so much," and viewed TESOL as a vocation (G3). Others were more pragmatic or even uncertain in their motivation – one interviewee confessed, "I did not know my real passion… I had no idea" and more or less stumbled into TESOL because it was available (G11). Despite these different starting points, by the end of their studies, students had formed specific aspirations. Many imagined themselves in educational careers, but at varying levels: a number of graduates aspired to move into leadership roles in education over time (e.g. becoming school managers or even working in the Ministry of Education, as noted by G3). One male graduate described his ambitious long-term goal to "be a principal of my own school… running a private school" (G1), reflecting entrepreneurial drive.

In contrast, some participants always viewed the TESOL degree more generally as a path to a stable job (not necessarily teaching). One alumna frankly stated, "My expectation was not to be a teacher. What I wanted was simply to get a good job after graduation" (G28). She ended up leveraging her English and soft skills in a non-teaching sector (finance) and was satisfied that the degree met her primary goal of employability outside the classroom. These examples illustrate how subjective assessments of "career success" depend on personal goals: a graduate with a passion for teaching might define success in terms of pedagogical impact or becoming a school leader, whereas another focused on financial stability might judge success by landing any respectable position. In the interviews, those with high personal ambition often maintained a strong drive to keep improving and advancing their careers. Several participants spoke of "never settling" – e.g. "I do not want to stay in the same place… I like to see the world, using my ability to grow more" (G7) – and they tended to seek further qualifications or promotions proactively. Overall, the data suggest that individuals with clear intrinsic motivation or long-term visions (whether in education or other fields) were more likely to pursue opportunities that aligned with those goals, thereby influencing their employability outcomes (such as obtaining desired roles or progressing in their careers). Meanwhile, those with more limited or short-term motivations sometimes expressed contentment with modest outcomes or pivoted to new goals as they discovered their interests.

4.2.3 Social Capital and Networking

Nearly every participant touched on the role of social networks and support in their employment journey. A common refrain was that personal connections significantly eased the school-to-work transition. "We need to have a good connection to get a job," one graduate bluntly stated (G3), capturing the sentiment that knowing the right people can be crucial in Cambodia's job market. Many interviewees, in fact, secured their first jobs through referrals or advice from friends, rather than through formal university placement. For example, one graduate was encouraged by a close friend to apply for teaching and later had a former classmate help introduce him to a school principal, effectively opening the door to a job offer (G1). Another described how a friend from university "provided me a lot of information" about job openings and even personally recommended her for a position, smoothing her entry into that company (G28). These accounts show that peer support and alumni networks often complemented the formal curriculum in shaping employability – graduates with strong social ties leveraged them to find opportunities and gain insider knowledge about prospective employers. Family connections, while less frequently mentioned, also played a part in some cases; one participant noted that in the public sector, colleagues from elite families appeared to get preferential treatment (G11), suggesting that socio-economic background can indirectly influence career advancement. It is worth noting that not all graduates relied on personal contacts – a few took a more independent route. One young woman (G29), for instance, emphasised that she "did not get help from people" in finding her teaching job; instead, she tapped into online resources, following school Facebook pages, Telegram job groups, and even chance sightings of job postings in the community to secure interviews on her own. This illustrates an alternate approach to building social capital – using technology and public networks to access opportunities, rather than using friends or family. In general, however, the availability of support – whether through friends, mentors, or online communities – greatly influenced subjective employability. Those who had guidance or referrals often felt more confident and found jobs more quickly, contributing to higher satisfaction with their post-graduation outcomes, whereas those without support sometimes described a more daunting, trial-and-error job search process.

4.2.4 Demographic and Background Influences

The interviews also explored whether personal demographic factors (such as gender, age, or family background) affected employment experiences. Most participants reported that, in the modern educational field, gender and age were not explicit barriers – "gender is not a matter" and "age is not a big problem if one has ability" were common sentiments (G2, G3). However, some nuanced challenges did emerge. A few male graduates believed they faced hiring bias in favour of female teachers for certain school positions. One young man recounted failing to get two teaching jobs "because they looked for a female teacher" even though he felt qualified, leaving him "disappointed" (G3). Conversely, a female teacher (G1) observed that in her workplace, female instructors seemed to be preferred by a female principal and were sometimes considered more suitable, especially for teaching young children, whereas "male teachers sometimes [are]

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less passionate with kids" (G1's observation). These experiences suggest that gender preferences in hiring can influence individual outcomes, even if not officially stated. Age was another factor that subtly influenced workplace dynamics. New graduates in their early twenties sometimes struggle to gain respect when working with older colleagues or clients. As one alumna in an auditing firm noted, "when we audit clients, they are often older… sometimes they challenge us because we are young" (G28). Similarly, a young teacher (G7) found that some adult students initially "do not trust me as a teacher" due to his youth, though he earned their respect over time. While such age-related scepticism did not prevent these participants from holding their jobs, it did affect their subjective experience of competence and authority in the role. In terms of family background, most students did not report any direct influence of family on their employability – few had family connections in the field, and several lived independently without familial intervention (G1, G2). Emotional support from family was often mentioned in positive terms (e.g. encouraging parents, supportive siblings), but there were also observations of how socio-economic privilege can create disparities. One graduate working in government noticed that "my co-worker who comes from a high-ranking family is treated differently", highlighting an unequal advantage that he, from a normal background, did not enjoy (G11). In summary, while merit and qualifications were seen as the primary drivers for employment, subtle dynamics around gender expectations, age hierarchies, and social class could shape how graduates perceived their opportunities and treatment. Those who encountered biases had to develop coping strategies (such as demonstrating their capability to overcome assumptions), and recognising these factors also influenced how they evaluated their own career progress relative to others.

4.2.5 Adaptability and Resilience

Finally, a recurrent personal theme was the importance of adaptability, resilience, and continuous learning in achieving favourable employment outcomes. Graduates who portrayed themselves as adaptable learners tended to handle the transition to work more positively and looked to the future with optimism. For instance, one alumna rated her job performance highly (8/10) because "I can catch up with things fast. Even if I am not familiar with something, I try to learn" (G28). Her willingness to continuously acquire new skills made her feel competent despite the steep learning curve in a new industry. Many others echoed the value of being flexible and resilient, especially when confronting challenges such as heavy workloads or initial failures. One participant described his mindset for growth: "I started from zero… I will not go back to zero" (G7), meaning that he is determined to keep moving forward in his career. He and several peers actively sought out further education (e.g. enrolling in master's programs or professional certifications) and new challenges to ensure their skills remain relevant. This proactive, resilient attitude is closely tied to subjective employability – those who are adaptable tend to remain confident that they will progress ("I am confident that my career will grow further," said one optimistic graduate, G10) even if current conditions are not ideal. A number of graduates expressed career optimism about the next five years, envisioning themselves in higher positions or new roles. This optimism often coexisted with a realistic

acknowledgement of difficulties (long hours, intense competition, etc.), but resilient individuals viewed difficulties as learning opportunities rather than insurmountable obstacles. Moreover, some drew on past hardships or sideline experiences (like volunteering or working in unrelated jobs during school) as lessons in perseverance. In essence, personal resilience and adaptability function as enablers of employability: they help graduates capitalise on the skills and knowledge from their education, navigate the unpredictability of the job market, and maintain a positive trajectory in their careers. Participants who demonstrated these traits were generally more satisfied with their employment status and more hopeful about achieving their long-term goals, underscoring how deeply personal factors interplay with academic preparation to shape real-world outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that both curriculum design and personal factors play crucial roles in shaping the subjective employability outcomes of TESOL graduates. These two areas, although distinct, are deeply intertwined. The study reveals that a well-structured curriculum, which integrates relevant content with ample practical experiences, significantly contributes to students' readiness and confidence for entering the workforce. The practical component of the curriculum, especially through practicum and micro-teaching experiences, served as key enablers of self-efficacy, bolstering graduates' perceived preparedness for teaching roles. This finding aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory, which emphasises that mastery experiences, such as those gained through hands-on practice, are essential for building self-efficacy and fostering a positive outlook on career prospects. Graduates who had earlier and more intense practicum experiences generally reported a stronger belief in their ability to succeed in the workplace.

However, while the practical aspects of the curriculum were seen as transformative, many participants noted that the program still heavily relied on theoretical coursework. Several students and graduates expressed frustration with the perceived irrelevance of certain general education courses, such as political science or mathematics, which they felt had little connection to their future teaching roles. This disconnect between academic theory and real-world application was highlighted as a barrier to the curriculum's overall effectiveness in preparing students for the labour market. These findings resonate with previous research suggesting that when the curriculum lacks direct applicability to students' future careers, it can lead to disengagement and a decline in motivation [22], [25]. The theory-practice gap in TESOL programs appears to be a persistent issue, underscoring the need for more integrated and practical learning opportunities throughout the curriculum, particularly in the earlier stages of the program.

The delivery of instruction was another key factor that influenced how graduates perceived their employability outcomes. Participants reported that courses that employed interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions, role plays, and peer-teaching activities, were more effective in enhancing their learning experiences. These methods not only contributed to subject-specific knowledge but also helped develop critical soft skills such as communication, leadership, and teamwork, all of which are highly valued by

employers. On the other hand, graduates who experienced predominantly lecture-based teaching expressed concerns about the lack of engagement and interaction in the classroom. These findings are consistent with existing literature that underscores the importance of active learning strategies in fostering both academic skills and employability [13], [25]. Moreover, several graduates suggested that more co-curricular activities, such as public speaking clubs or teaching assistantships, could provide additional opportunities for skill development and enhance graduates' career prospects.

In terms of personal factors, the study found that self-efficacy was a central determinant of graduates' perceived employability. Graduates with higher levels of self-confidence in their teaching abilities were more proactive in their job search and tended to secure employment more quickly. This aligns with SCCT, which suggests that self-efficacy influences career behaviours, including job search intensity and career persistence [14]. Interestingly, some graduates, particularly those with limited teaching experience or first-generation students, reported lower levels of self-efficacy, which made them less confident about entering the workforce. For these individuals, external validation—such as feedback from mentors or successful practicum experiences—was crucial in boosting their confidence and encouraging them to continue pursuing teaching careers. These findings highlight the importance of building self-efficacy not just through academic and practical training but also through mentorship and feedback loops that support students' professional growth.

Motivation also emerged as a critical factor shaping graduates' employability perceptions. For some participants, a deep intrinsic passion for teaching and English led them to view their education as a vocation rather than just a stepping stone to employment. These individuals were more likely to define success in terms of personal fulfilment and professional impact, which helped them remain motivated even in the face of setbacks. Conversely, graduates who were more focused on job security and financial stability had more pragmatic goals and viewed their education as a means to achieve a stable career. These differing motivations impacted not only their job search strategies but also their career satisfaction. Graduates with clear, intrinsic motivations tended to take a more active role in shaping their careers, whereas those motivated by extrinsic factors were more likely to settle for available positions without pursuing long-term career development. This observation supports the dual-path model of SCCT, which distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and highlights their differential impact on career outcomes [15].

The role of social capital, including personal networks and mentoring relationships, was also a recurring theme. Many graduates attributed their job-search success to referrals and connections within their personal and professional networks. This reliance on networks aligns with research on social capital, which suggests that connections and referrals significantly enhance job-seeking outcomes, particularly in competitive labour markets [20], [21]. Graduates who lacked strong networks or connections, on the other hand, reported facing greater difficulty in securing employment, underscoring the importance of networking opportunities in TESOL programs. These findings suggest that universities should place greater emphasis on developing alumni networks and industry connections that facilitate students' entry into the workforce.

Finally, adaptability and resilience emerged as crucial personal attributes that helped graduates navigate the uncertainties of the labour market. Graduates who displayed a growth mindset—the belief that they could learn and adapt—tended to view challenges as learning opportunities rather than insurmountable obstacles. These individuals were more likely to persist through initial setbacks and ultimately achieve their career goals. In contrast, those who struggled with resilience found the job market more intimidating and often faced career uncertainty even after securing employment. This observation highlights the importance of psychosocial resources such as resilience, adaptability, and continuous learning in enhancing employability outcomes [18], [19]. Programs that foster these personal attributes, through career counselling, skills development workshops, and mentoring, are likely to produce more adaptable and employable graduates.

In summary, the findings from this study underscore the synergistic relationship between curriculum quality and personal factors in shaping graduates' employability. A curriculum rich in practical experience, coupled with strong personal factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, and social capital, provides the foundation for successful transitions into the workforce. However, as evidenced in this study, when either the curriculum or personal factors are lacking, graduates may experience greater difficulty and uncertainty in their career pathways. These insights highlight the need for holistic approaches to employability that incorporate both academic preparedness and personal development throughout the higher education experience.

It is worth noting that there are two main limitations in this study. First, a single research site and program using a qualitative design limits the generalizability of the findings; second, self-reports from only students and graduates during the interview may bias positivity/negativity. Therefore, future research should aim for more than one research site and program to understand how curriculum and personal factors influence students' and graduates' employability outcomes, and samples should cover employers, school administrators, professors and other relevant stakeholders to gather more holistic information.

6. IMPLICATION

Three implications can be drawn from the results and discussion. First, it is about curriculum design. TESOL programs should ensure that their curricula are aligned with real-world teaching needs and offer a balanced mix of theory and practice. There should be an emphasis on early and sustained practical exposure, like internships, micro-teaching or classroom simulations from the first and second year of the undergraduate program to build self-efficacy and better prepare students for the demands of the teaching profession. Waiting to expose students to teaching-related courses and activities in the third or fourth year seems to be too late, as students have fewer opportunities to sharpen their teaching-related skills. Second, personal development is also important for students. Beyond curriculum delivery, programs should foster personal attributes like self-efficacy, motivation, and resilience. Career counselling and mentorship programs can help students clarify their career goals, build self-confidence, and develop adaptability in the face of challenges. Lastly, networking opportunities really help students to be successful in

securing their jobs during or after graduation. Schools should actively promote networking opportunities, such as alumni networks and internships, to help students build connections that will support their job search and career progression.

7. CONCLUSION

The thematic analysis reveals that both curriculum quality and personal factors jointly influence subjective employability in complex ways. Common across nearly all participants was the belief that a strong and relevant curriculum, which is rich in practical training, pertinent content, and supportive teaching, can greatly enhance one's confidence and readiness for work.

Equally common was the recognition that personal agency, including confidence, motivation, networking and adaptability, is critical in leveraging one's education toward actual career success. Students and graduates who felt well-prepared by their program and who also possessed high self-efficacy and support networks were the most positive about their employability outcomes.

By contrast, when either the curriculum was lacking, for instance, too theoretical or containing perceived "wasteful" courses, or personal factors were unfavourable, like low confidence or weak networks, individuals tended to report more difficulty and uncertainty in their transition to employment. Divergent cases highlight that not all experiences were uniform: for example, a few participants valued broad academic knowledge for its own sake even if not directly job-related, and a minority managed to secure opportunities without leaning on personal connections.

Nonetheless, the overall pattern indicates a synergistic relationship – perceptions of curriculum quality set the stage for skill development, but personal factors determine how those skills are realised in the job market. Graduates navigate their career paths by combining what the university provided with who they are as individuals. This implication interplay is evident in their stories of entering the workforce, and it emphasises that improving graduates' employability requires attending to both educational quality and personal development during the higher education journey.

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