

## Attitudes Towards Graduate Unemployment in Southeast Asia: An Examination Using Himmah and Rajaa

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### ABSTRACT

Graduate unemployment is a significant challenge for Muslim-majority states. Based upon focus groups conducted with university students in Indonesia and Brunei, this research examines what insights the Islamic literature can provide with respect to tackling joblessness at the behavioural level. Using the theoretical model developed by Alvi (2021), it differentiates between the reach and purpose behind students' aspirations, as well as the willpower (*himmah*) and true hope (*raja*) required to reach their goal. The results of the focus groups suggest that most students lack a clearly articulated career path, which impacts their attitudes towards job hunting. The paper highlights three areas of action for policymakers and higher education institutions: firstly, it highlights the importance of prioritising exposure to different professions to enable students to make an informed choice. It secondly supports the use of religion to root students' motivations in a broader vision. It finally recommends a flexible approach to strengthen the clarity of students' aspirations where necessary, and ensure they have support during school-to-work transitions through the use of alumni or a mentorship scheme.

### ملخص

تمثل البطالة في صفوف الخريجين تحديا كبيرا للدول ذات الأغلبية المسلمة. واستنادا إلى مجموعات مناقشة أجريت مع طلاب جامعيين في إندونيسيا وبروناي، يستكشف هذا البحث الرؤى التي يمكن أن توفرها الأدبيات الإسلامية فيما يتعلق بمعالجة البطالة على المستوى السلوكي. وباستخدام النموذج النظري الذي طوره ألفي (2021)، فإنه يميز بين مدى الوصول والغرض وراء تطلعات الطلاب، وكذلك

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قوة الإرادة (المهمة) والأمل الحقيقي (الرجاء) المطلوب للوصول إلى هدفهم. وتشير نتائج مجموعات المناقشة إلى أن معظم الطلاب يفتقرون إلى مسار وظيفي واضح المعالم، مما يؤثر على مواقفهم تجاه البحث عن عمل. وتسلط الورقة البحثية الضوء على ثلاثة مجالات عمل لصناع السياسات ومؤسسات التعليم العالي: أولاً، تسلط الضوء على أهمية إعطاء الأولوية للتعامل مع مهين مختلفة لتمكين الطلاب من اتخاذ قرار مستنير. ثانياً، تدعم استخدام الدين لتجذير دوافع الطلاب في رؤية أوسع. وتوصي أخيراً باتباع نهج مرن لتعزيز وضوح تطلعات الطلاب عند الضرورة، والتأكد من حصولهم على الدعم أثناء الانتقال من التعليم إلى العمل من خلال الاستعانة بقدماء الخريجين أو استخدام مخطط توجيهي.

### ABSTRAITE

Le chômage des diplômés est un défi important pour les États à majorité musulmane. Sur la base de groupes de discussion menés avec des étudiants universitaires en Indonésie et au Brunei, cette recherche examine les idées que la littérature islamique peut fournir en matière de lutte contre le chômage au niveau comportemental. À l'aide du modèle théorique élaboré par Alvi (2021), il établit une distinction entre la portée et le but des aspirations des élèves, ainsi que la volonté (*himmah*) et le véritable espoir (*rajaa*) nécessaires pour atteindre leur objectif. Les résultats des groupes de discussion suggèrent que la plupart des étudiants n'ont pas de plan de carrière clairement défini, ce qui a un impact sur leur attitude vis-à-vis de la recherche d'emploi. Le document met en évidence trois domaines d'action pour les décideurs politiques et les établissements d'enseignement supérieur : tout d'abord, il souligne l'importance de privilégier l'exposition à différentes professions pour permettre aux étudiants de faire un choix éclairé. Il soutient ensuite l'utilisation de la religion pour ancrer les motivations des élèves dans une vision plus large. Il recommande enfin une approche flexible pour renforcer la clarté des aspirations des étudiants lorsque cela s'avère nécessaire, et pour s'assurer qu'ils bénéficient d'un soutien lors de la transition entre l'école et le travail, par le biais d'anciens élèves ou d'un programme de mentorat.

**Keywords:** Graduate Unemployment, Behaviour, Brunei, Indonesia, Al-Ghazali

**JEL Classification:** J60, J64

## 1. Introduction

Graduate unemployment is rapidly emerging as one of the most significant challenges facing emerging economies. Given the global emphasis on improving human capital, significant social upgrading has taken place in most regions over the past three decades. With the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, the expansion of primary, secondary and tertiary education has witnessed a growing cadre of educated young people (Altbach et al. 2009). However, employment rates have failed to keep up. On average, youth unemployment rates increased from 12.3% in 2008 to 13.1% in 2018 globally (ILO 2018). The highest rates are reported in the Middle East and North Africa region, followed by Latin America and then Western Europe. Globally, 20% of young people have NEET status, such that they are neither in education nor active in the labour market (ILO 2020).

Unemployment rates among those with a university education are often observed to be higher in several regions, with opportunities for middle-skilled employment often hollowed out by technological progress in comparison to informal or agricultural work (ILO 2020). Graduate unemployment is a waste of human capital and can result in a 'brain drain' if the long-term jobless choose to migrate abroad. Additionally, declining returns to tertiary education dampen wages, with graduates entering the labour market in a weak economy likely to suffer from lower lifetime earnings (Cribb et al 2017, Schwandt and Wachter 2019). Persistent unemployment can also lead to diminished mental and physical health, marital instability and lower life satisfaction (Brand 2015), thus reducing individuals' overall ability to contribute to societal development.

Such global trends are reflected in Southeast Asia, where, despite falling unemployment, the proportion of jobless graduates remains high. In Indonesia, graduate unemployment stood at more than 7.5% in 2020, higher than the country's average of 7% (Statistics Indonesia 2020). Similarly in Brunei, youth unemployment constitutes 21.3%; the second largest group of unemployed youth are university graduates (Centre for Strategic and Policy Studies 2021). There are additional concerns over the impact the coronavirus pandemic will have on jobseekers, particularly on fresh graduates as they enter the world of work for the first time.

In explaining youth, and more particularly graduate unemployment, many arguments lean towards the traditional explanation of a skills mismatch.

However, the insights of behavioural economics are changing our understanding of how individuals choose and act. Contrary to the homo economicus model, individuals can make systematic errors, be put off by complexity, procrastinate, or hold non-standard preferences and beliefs (DellaVigna 2009). Economic actors can also be nudged towards certain outcomes by capitalising on systematic cognitive and behavioural biases, as famously documented by Kahneman et al (1982). Consequently, there is a space for understanding how individuals perceive and behave in relation to unemployment in order to deliver policy success.

Labour market anomalies in Southeast Asia have been noted in the societal preference for government jobs, rooted in the region's history of large public sectors (Cheong and Lawrey 2009, Anandari and Nuraykin 2019). However, there has been little other research on the aspirations and motivations of young graduates and how this has impacted job-seeking behaviour in these countries.

This paper aims to fill this gap by analysing graduate unemployment through the lens of Islamic literature on aspirations, motivations and knowledge. Drawing on contributions from focus groups with final year university students in Indonesia and Brunei, it will investigate the prevailing attitudes and behaviour towards graduate unemployment, and discuss how aspirations shape job-seeking behaviour. This research is relevant to policymakers seeking to increase employment among young people, but also universities and higher education institutions that aim to support their students' school-to-work transitions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Behaviour in the labour market**

The rise of behavioural economics has fundamentally changed how we understand individual responses to labour market trends. This has led to a renewed focus by academics and policymakers on understanding how jobseekers and employers make decisions. Briscese and Tan (2018) find that increasing motivation to look for work can be achieved through small and inexpensive policy changes. For example, their report finds that job assistance can be improved by personalising text messaging; this is more likely to increase self-motivation and attendance at recruitment fairs. The report additionally highlights the importance of positive reinforcement; the

authors' cite an intervention that displayed a chart of the number of successful job seekers who found employment through the centre to leverage social norms. The trial found that 49.4% of job seekers in the intervention group found work, compared to 32% of the control group.

Significant attention has also been dedicated to the particular role of aspirations and motivations of individuals and their impact on future success. However, while much of this research focuses on students, both in high school and university, the results are inconclusive.

Aspiration failure has been found to contribute to a downward spiral towards greater poverty, particularly in developing countries (Ibrahim 2011, Bernard et al 2011). However, Khattab (2014) finds evidence from British high school students that although aspirations, expectations and achievement do converge amongst some students, this does not occur amongst the majority. Additionally, in one out of every five young people, high aspirations and high expectations do not lead to academic achievement.

A focus on aspirations alone has been shown to be insufficient; based on studies of students in three areas of the United Kingdom, Kintrea et al (2011) find that young people need to be guided regarding how to reach their goals. Students require informed support, and the full range of educational outcomes and jobs are often not well understood. This is a factor noted in Alvi's (2021) theoretical model through the ilm axis. Significant variation was also observed in different areas of the UK, with the authors stressing that context specific factors, including class, culture and history, are relevant when understanding aspirations. Similarly, Amida et al (2020) find that intrinsic motivation among graduate students is the strongest motivation type that predicted perceived success, pointing to the importance of analysing not only aspirations, but the underlying reasons for certain goals as well.

Henley (2007) also finds with respect to transitions entrepreneurship that aspirations are not automatically indicative of future success. Aspirations were, for example, not found to be associated with intentional activity, such as active saving. This reinforces the idea that policy must address the preparedness of start-up businesses among aspiring entrepreneurs. This focus is echoed by Cummings et al (2012), who find that there is no evidence that attainment in school is impacted by changes in aspirations.

They argue that instead of ‘raising aspirations’, there must be a shift to ‘keeping aspirations on track’. Alvi (2021) again highlights this aspect through the Quwwah axis.

Finally, a systematic review of 170,000 pieces of evidence on this topic by Gorard et al (2012) finds that despite the significant amount of existing research, a causal relationship still cannot be drawn between aspirations and achievements. They point to this as being the result of poor-quality evidence and no rigorous evaluations of interventions that had been conducted in this area.

This summary consequently reveals a significant gap in the literature; while aspirations are of importance, specifics are required regarding how this manifests at different levels of education and in different places. Additionally, evidence to determine a clear causal relationship between aspirations and achievements is lacking, as well as a framework that adequately recognises motivations. We have also not found a paper that analyses these aspects in consideration of the influence of Islam as a cultural factor important to behavioural choice. This is a notable gap given the significance of Islam as a way of life for Muslim students; these are areas that this research seeks to elaborate upon.

## **2.2 Aspirations and knowledge in the Islamic tradition**

The classical Islamic literature offers a new perspective on understanding the relationship between aspirations and actions. This research uses the theoretical model developed by Alvi (2021) to structure our approach to the focus groups.

His theoretical model is concerned with the effect of individual attitudes and behaviour on graduate unemployment. We provide a brief introduction to the model below.

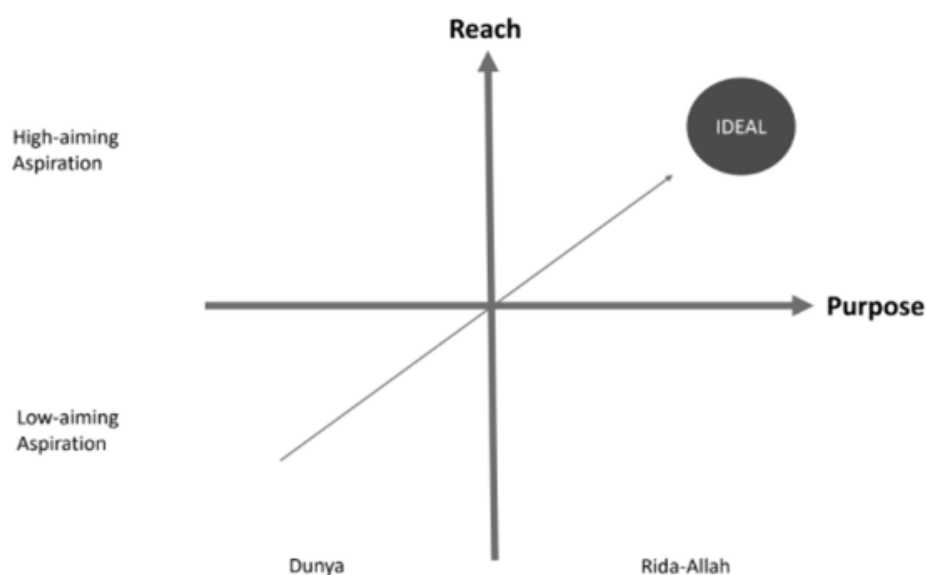
Drawing from the Islamic canon, the theoretical model focuses on two broad areas of individual behaviour: ‘*uluww-al-himmah*, high-aiming aspirations, and *rajaa*, true hope.

The first, high-aiming aspirations, are modelled across two axes: reach and purpose, as shown in Figure 1. Reach captures the height to which an individual’s aspires. At one end of the spectrum, a student simply aspires

to graduate, and at the end of the spectrum, the student aspires to reach the pinnacle of their chosen work area.

Purpose examines the motivation behind the student's aspiration. Here, the spectrum moves from being completely motivated by the *dunya*, or worldly gain, to being completely motivated by *Rida-Allah*, or the Pleasure of Allah.

**Figure 1:** Modelling '*Uluww al-himmah*' (Alvi 2021)

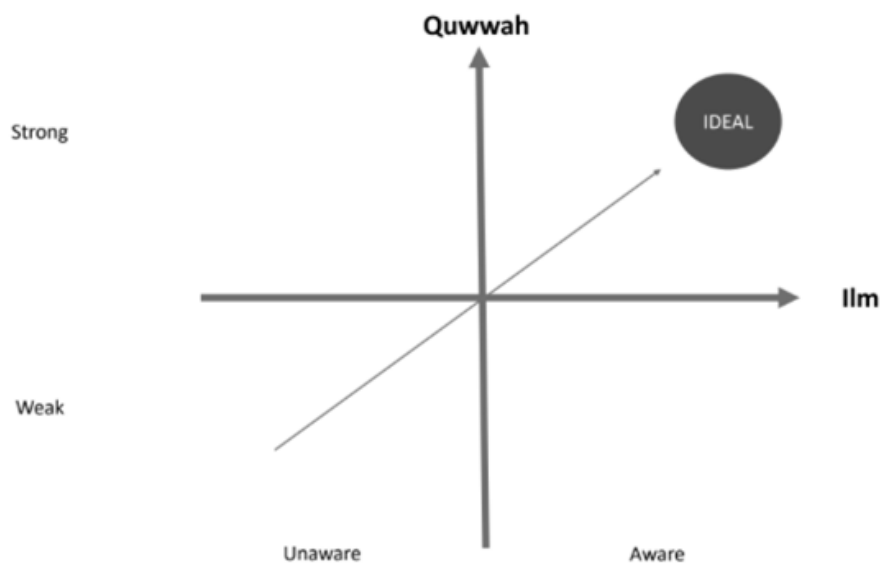


*Rajaa*, or true hope, examines a student's knowledge (*ilm*) of how to succeed with the motivation (*quwwah*) to implement that knowledge.

Alvi (2021) takes from the classic work of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (Al-Ghazali 2014). While the work of Al-Ghazali focuses on the concepts of fear and hope in Allah, the delineation of states an individual may find themselves informs the discussion of graduate employment well. Al-Ghazali provides a typology of states an individual may occupy. The first is *rajaa*, or true hope. In this state, the individual has knowledge (*ilm*) of how to reach a predetermined goal and the motivation to achieve it (*quwwah*). The second state is that of *wahm*, or delusion. Here, an individual knows how to achieve a goal (*ilm*), but lacks the strength of

intention to achieve it (*quwwah*). The last state is of *tamannah*, or vain hope. In this state we find an absence of *ilm* but the presence of *quwwah*; an individual is self-motivated, but is unaware of what course of action to take.

**Figure 2:** Modelling Rajaa (Alvi 2021)



Relating these concepts to graduate unemployment presents the student jobseeker as requiring four fundamental elements: a high-reaching ambition, a sense of purpose that fuels their aspiration, knowledge of how to achieve their goal, and willpower to implement the actions required (Alvi 2021).

### 3. Introduction to the case studies

The Southeast Asia region has witnessed impressive growth and poverty reductions in recent years. Yet as with many developing regions, emerging economies and middle income countries in particular continue to face challenges with respect to employment.

The most populous Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, has a population of over 270 million. The country is thought to be at the peak of



its demographic dividend and has witnessed rising enrolment into tertiary education, with a high of 6,535,705 students enrolling in an undergraduate programmes in 2018 (UNESCO 2020a). The largest economy in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the tenth largest economy in purchasing power parity, and has made significant attempts to diversify its economy and reduce absolute poverty over the past 20 years. Despite a gross graduation ratio from tertiary education of 21.2% (UNESCO 2020b), youth unemployment, though below a peak in 2005, has been rising since 2017. Youth account for over 50% of the unemployed population, and most unemployed youth have never worked before (ILO 2015). Graduate unemployment is at 7.5%, above the national average of 7% (Statistics Indonesia 2020). Most young people also work in the informal sector, often in a self-employed capacity; however, this has been shown to have long term scarring effects, such that individuals can expect either higher unemployment propensity or lower subsequent earning for the rest of their lives (Pritadrajati et al 2021).

Brunei, by contrast, has a small population of only 433,000, with just 6,729 undergraduate students enrolling in 2020 (UNESCO 2020a). A rentier economy, the sale of oil and gas account for half of its GDP and 90% of export revenues (Musa and Basir 2019). The public sector is the country's largest employer, providing jobs to 40% of Bruneians. With a gross graduation ratio of 22.95% (UNESCO 2020b), youth unemployment has been steadily rising, reaching 21.3%; most of these are secondary school leavers, followed by university graduates (Centre for Strategic and Policy Studies 2021).

Various reasons have been put forward in an effort to understand the persistently high unemployment rates in both Indonesia and Brunei. At a macro level, this has been explained as a result of poor quality education and a mismatch of skills (di Gropello 2011, Musa and Idris 2020). Consequently, in Indonesia, supply side efforts to improve school-to-work transitions have focused on providing vocational skills and jobseeker information services (ILO 2015). Recommendations for Brunei have also pointed to the need to attract foreign investment and improve the business environment in order to diversify the economy and create more private sector jobs (IMF 2019).

At the level of the individual, some attention has also been directed to the employment aspirations of jobseekers. The preference for government

employment, the result of a historical legacy of large public sectors in the region, has been noted in both countries. Research in Indonesia has also shown that workers with higher education levels have a lower risk tolerance, and so opt for the public sector due to the increased security (Anandari and Nuryakin 2019). Similarly in Brunei, Cheong and Lawrey (2009) find that there is a mismatch between expectations and available employment in Brunei, with many jobseekers desiring clerical and lower white-collar office jobs, as opposed to manual, skilled and semi-skilled labour. Additionally, Rizzo et al (2016), find that one of the main covariates of unemployment is field of study, with a particularly high unemployment rate amongst Bruneian arts and humanities graduates.

This paper aims to further scrutinise individual-level phenomena. Drawing on the theoretical framework provided by the Islamic literature, it will examine how students' aspirations, motivation and knowledge are relevant to job seeking behaviours.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study is based on the findings of a series of focus groups conducted between January and February 2021 with final year university students in Indonesia and Brunei. Focus groups are discussion groups facilitated by a moderator where participants share views on a particular subject. This method effectively allowed us to generate a significant amount of data on the employment aspirations of graduating students, and how they were preparing themselves to enter the job market. It also allowed us to contextualise and validate individual responses, and gain insight into how opinions and career choices are socially influenced (Flick 2009: 205).

##### **4.1 Sample and data collection**

Four focus groups were carried out online via Zoom, with between four and seven students in each session. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 23. As observed in Table 1, of the total 22 students, ten were studying in Brunei and 12 in Indonesia. Students were recruited through local contacts at four universities, two in each target country, through a stratified sampling method, with the criteria that participants were final year, full-time undergraduate students graduating from different degree courses. This allowed some common ground between the participants, but ensured that our conclusions could be as representative as possible across

different subject areas (Seale et al 2004: 69). A random selection from the potential candidates was then made by university officials. Only two participants were recent graduates and were included in two of the groups, one from Indonesia and one from Brunei, to give a different dimension to the discussion on job search. The gender composition of the group was roughly equal, with 10 male and 12 female students in total. Appropriate consent was sought prior to the session and it was made clear that all contributions would be anonymised and the audio and video recordings would be kept confidential.

Conducted as semi-structured interviews, the questions for the focus group were chosen in advance, but flexibility was built in through careful probing and moderating of the discussion. Care was also taken to ensure that questions were unbiased through the use of open questions and leaving room for the participants to elaborate on issues they saw as important (Robson and McCartan 2015). The key questions of the session directly asked students about their career goals, the motivations behind their aspirations, whether they had made efforts to secure a job after graduation, and if they had access to resources that would aid their job search. Each session lasted between 60 and 75 minutes.

A key limitation of this method was the background of the students interviewed, which leaned heavily towards the humanities, business administration and the social sciences, in particular, economics and finance related subjects. None of the participants were studying the natural sciences, and only a minority were focused on engineering, mathematics or computing. This makes our conclusions more relevant to non-STEM graduates, however this is still reflective of the population of both Indonesia and Brunei, where 80.6% and 61.6% respectively of graduates are in non-STEM fields. Additionally, Rizzo et al (2016) notes in relation to Brunei that humanities and social sciences students make up more of the graduate unemployed than other course graduates; consequently this is not an obstacle to answering our research question.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of sample

Demographics	N	%
Sample size	22	100
Country		
- Indonesia	12	55
- Brunei	10	45
Gender		
- Male	10	45
- Female	12	55
Year of Graduation		
- 2020	2	9
- 2021	20	91
Field of Study		
- Arts and Humanities	2	9
- Law	3	14
- Social Sciences, Journalism	4	18
- Business Administration, Finance and Accounting	9	41
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT)	1	4.5
- Natural Sciences, Maths and Statistics	2	9
- Engineering	1	4.5

#### 4.2 Data Analysis

Open questions for the interview were derived as per the theoretical framework on *himmah* and *rajaa* derived from Islamic literature. The interviews of the four focus groups were recorded and transcribed in order to conduct a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A preliminary analysis was conducted by the researchers in order to become familiar with the data and reflect on its meaning. Next, the participants’ responses were open coded, dividing the data into units that reflected certain thoughts, experiences and attitudes. During the second axial coding stage, these codes were grouped according to certain subthemes or categories. Finally in the selective coding stage, these subthemes were organised according to the overarching themes established by our theoretical framework, as per a deductive approach to thematic analysis. At the conclusion of this process of analysis, a list of topics was generated, and the topics were compiled into categories that were labelled as key findings.

While coding the data, an effort was made to be conscious of potential respondent bias; in answer to some questions, a tendency of participants to follow the first speaker was observed. However, the data showed that this bias was weak and was more evident in later speakers continuing the themes of the discussion set by initial speakers, rather than unwillingness to disagree with previous statements.

The analysis of the interview transcripts painted a picture of the aspirations and behaviour of final year university students as they prepare to enter the job market. The following sections outline the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and their implications for understanding graduate unemployment.

## **5. Findings**

The findings of this research are presented in five parts, the first four based upon the primary themes of Alvi's (2021) theoretical framework: Reach, Purpose, *Ilm* and *Quwwah*. Well-being is the final consideration in which the results are categorised in order to adequately answer all facets of the research question.

### **5.1 Reach**

*Diverse and evolving aspirations, but lacking a clear goal* – Although interviewees reporting uncertainty among their peers as to what career they would like to pursue in the future, 68% of the respondents did have at least one career aspiration in mind. However few of the respondents were able to articulate a clear career goal that they aimed to work towards, with most simply stating the industry in which they wished to work.

Students' preferences were largely in line with their degree major, and so were oriented heavily towards careers in finance, management, law and research, with one student pursuing a career related to engineering. However, several also expressed their desire to enter non-traditional careers; one respondent cited their interest in artistic professions, while entrepreneurship and start-ups were mentioned several times as an attractive option. One respondent even stated their desire to become a barista and open their own coffee shop, following exposure to professional baristas on social media. The majority of those who did not know what they wanted to do after graduation stated that they would be interested in

pursuing further study to give them more time to decide. A minority of students had no plans or direction as to what they wanted to pursue after graduation.

*Socioeconomic status as a key determinant* – Students' aspirations are shaped to an extent by their family background and socioeconomic security. Several participants mentioned they were expected to support their families, and so were conscious of securing a well-paid job quickly. By contrast, those from wealthier families stated that there was no immediate pressure to secure a job, with many leaning towards further study to buy time. Students in Indonesia also highlighted that family connections were important in securing certain jobs in the legal and commercial fields, and felt limited as they did not have access to those networks. Additionally, a distinction was drawn between students who had access to capital from their family and could start their own business if they were unemployed long term and those who lacked said access.

*Conscious of competition* – In all the focus groups, students showed an awareness of significant competition in the job market in both countries, as well as concern over the impacts of coronavirus. Many stated that they felt compelled to take the first job offered to them in order to avoid lengthy periods of unemployment. This was also a source of insecurity, with many students feeling unable to differentiate themselves in the job market.

*Expectation of short-term unemployment*– Most students expressed the expectation that they would be unemployed in the short term, and instead of immediately planning for their career, many had back-up plans for how they would spend their free time. Students expressed a desire to use this period to improve their skillset, engage in volunteer work or start their own business.

*“A lot of my friends who actually setting up their own personal businesses. Like, they are smart because, you know, they start early before they graduated. They gain the competitive advantage, I guess. Like, it's not like you're waiting for graduation and then you look for income; instead, you're using that income that you've already prepared beforehand to actually support yourself before getting a real job.” (Finance student from Brunei)*

However, several students did cite getting a job quickly as the mark of a successful graduate.

*Further education as a safety net* – Several students in both countries noted that if they could not find or decide on a career, they would instead start a master's degree. In many cases, these were not intended to enhance their skillset or even related to their field, with one student who expressed an interest in epidemiology stating his plan to pursue an MBA. This was frequently cited as a strategy to buy time.

*Aspirations for a supportive work environment and skill development* – Students' priorities in a potential job role leaned largely towards a work environment that would be supportive of graduates and allow them to develop their skills. Opportunities for progression and a role that allowed them to maintain a work-life balance were also ranked highly. Many students were notably keener to pursue these characteristics over salary, with students in Brunei stating they would be willing to accept minimum wage if other criteria were met. Students also expressed a desire to work in a field of their interest and contribute to their community. There was also evidence of such preferences being guided by religious precepts; students were conscious of opting for a career that was *halal* (permissible according to Islamic law) and guided by Islamic norms.

## **5.2 Purpose**

*Students are motivated by personal interest and family considerations* – Participants were generally studying a subject or aspiring for a career that was in line with their passions. However, parental and societal expectations did play a role in determining the kind of jobs many were aiming for, with several highlighting the cultural preference for a government job due to perceptions of its security. Additionally, students who were expected to support the family after graduation were heavily influenced by their parents' preferences, with some expressing a desire to be able to follow their own dream. Nevertheless, a few students suggested that expectations were changing and that parents were becoming more open-minded towards their children opting for non-traditional careers.

*Religion as a motivation* – Islam significantly shaped students' motivations in both countries, particularly in Indonesia. Participants cited their desire to give back to society as stemming from a religious injunction

to do good. Many also highlighted that working is a duty in Islam and expressed a sense of religious responsibility to care for their family. Some were also motivated to go into particular careers for the sake of Islam, such as Islamic finance or lecturing in the Islamic sciences. One student was particularly motivated by the Islamic injunction to care for the environment for his aspiration to develop solar powered panels:

*“I’m a mechanical engineering student, so is not really related with Islam. But for me, by contributing to the humanity is my way of giving back to Islam itself. So, as I said, renewable energy again, we are basically saving the Earth from global warming, from oil depletion.”*  
(Engineering student from Brunei)

### 5.3 Ilm

*Lacking employability skills* – There was an underlying feeling amongst final year students of being unprepared for the job market, with many decrying the disproportionate focus on grades rather than applicability. Students complained of the highly theoretical nature of their studies, scarcely providing technical skills that would give them a competitive advantage.

*“We are more into theory base than technical base. And also it’s very hard; the working world is very competitive because hundreds of people are applying for one to two slots of jobs. So when the unemployment rate is higher, most people blame the youth for being choosy of the job.”* (Finance student from Brunei)

Those students that had taken part in an internship or university project that had them partake in a real-world project unanimously found the experience beneficial, citing the development of practical skills in particular. Those that did not have the opportunity to do an internship or acquire work experience as part of their studies expressed the desire to do so.

*“I have to say what I was learning in college didn’t actually determine my internship performance. Instead, I was required to learn new things from the company. And perhaps, I think*



*that this opportunity has led me to gain some knowledge, what I have not learned in college, and I appreciate that because the company provided some training for new employees.”*  
(Business student from Indonesia)

*Alumni as a core resource* – Final year students tended to look towards alumni to ask questions and seek advice on potential careers. This was particularly evident in Indonesia, where students highlighted that alumni were best placed to advise them as they had been through the same experience. However, several expressed a desire to have access to alumni through more formal channels, rather than solely through friendship networks or student societies.

*University resources insufficient or unknown* – Most students expressed dissatisfaction with the resources offered by their universities. Participants from one university were completely unfamiliar with the concept of a careers centre, with no such service offered on campus, whilst students at another school said they had been unaware of the existence of a careers centre for an entire year. Generally, university careers services were said to be infrequently updated with opportunities or were focused on particular careers and did not offer broad support. Universities did not otherwise give guidance on preparing job applications, resumes or preparing for interviews, although many expressed their desire for this service. Additionally, where career events were held but attendance was not mandated, students often failed to attend.

*LinkedIn as an emerging resource* – Social media is playing an increasingly significant role in connecting students to available jobs. Many students referenced LinkedIn as a site they had used to apply to jobs, with one student in Indonesia mentioning having applied to a role through Instagram. Both platforms were also used by participants to research different firms and workplace culture. Students also used LinkedIn to expand their professional network and even make transnational connections to discuss fields of mutual interest.

## 5.4 Quwwah

*Lack of preparation* – Although a majority of the students had a particular career goal in mind and knew where to look for work, only a minority had begun a proactive job search. Several students explained that most firms, including those in the public sector, did not consider applications from university students until they had completed their studies, so the graduate positions they could currently apply to were limited. However, most had additionally not attempted to apply for internships or any temporary work placements, although they acknowledged that the experience would be beneficial.

Part of this complacency stemmed from a lack of confidence. Several participants expressed feeling that there was insufficient guidance on how to structure their job application and make their CVs competitive, with students in Indonesia feeling self-conscious of how they would make themselves stand out in a crowd of fresh graduates.

*“I don't know if it's just insecurity acting up. Or maybe it is true that I don't have that much experience, or maybe my CV is not that good compared to my competitors. A lot of them also have connections in the sense of they know seniors who can give them tips on how to improve their achievements, their CV or their skills in the interviews, for example.” (Law student from Indonesia)*

However, many students had no clear reason as to why they had not started applications, with several admitting that they believed they were late in their efforts.

*Prioritising skills development* – Given the consensus that graduates were lacking in the technical and soft skills useful in the workplace, there was enthusiasm amongst students for enhancing their skill set. Several students mentioned that they had either started or were planning to improve their grasp of foreign languages, do volunteer work, take online short courses and learn new IT programmes. These plans were also relevant in the context of facing short-term unemployment due to the pandemic, as well as being a path that older siblings or friends had taken when they were unemployed.

*“So for maybe one to two years of being unemployed, what my friend did was involve himself in volunteer work; [we can] improve our soft skills, maybe in terms of presentation, dealings with the communities and give back to the communities by volunteer work.” (Applied Mathematic and Economics student from Brunei)*

“I’m considering to take courses or training in data science sites, such as Google Data, Studio and Python, to improve my skills and portfolio.” (Business student from Indonesia)

Additionally, several students in both Indonesia and Brunei shared their plans to start a small business from home, particularly if they were unable to secure a job in the short term. Most saw this as a temporary path to sustain their income, however, some were attracted to entrepreneurship in the long run and believed it would be a beneficial experience.

*Lacking inspiration* – Several students noted that universities had made attempts to invite speakers and former alumni to discuss future career options with students. However in many cases, these events were unknown or students did not have the motivation to attend. Even when these speakers were integrated into the course schedule, the motivational effects seemed to be short-lived, with the emphasis on the student to reach out should they need more support.

## **5.5 Well-being**

*Unemployment as a source of anxiety* – Most of the students admitted that, when faced with long-term unemployment, they would likely experience anxiety and/or self-esteem issues. However, as short-term unemployment was expected, many did not see themselves as initially being too worried if they were unable to find work. Students cited parental and societal expectations as being a source of pressure in the long run, although a distinction was evident; those from wealthier families seemed more prepared to wait until a suitable job presented itself. Islam was also seen as relevant to overcoming anxiety; students from three out of four of the groups emphasised the importance of having faith in God’s plan and their conviction that their worldly provision (*rizq*) had been decreed.

*“Allah told us to work, right? To fulfil our needs, to fulfil our family needs. Even though I have decided my future is to become an accountant, Allah’s plan is better than mine. So when I fail, I believe that Allah has best destiny for me. And there are everything has a reason to happen.” (Economics student from Indonesia)*

*Unemployment as a source of opportunity* – Many students said they would use unemployment as an opportunity to develop their skills and narrow down their area of interest. Some had plans to start a business to sustain themselves during this time, and most expressed their desire to maximise their free time by taking short courses or improving their language skills.

## **6. Discussion**

The range of responses highlighted thus far point to the need for nuance in evaluating these findings against the theoretical framework. Factors as diverse as aspirations, motivations, and knowledge cannot be explained or controlled based on one factor. Rather, understanding the interaction between the themes identified in the theoretical framework can highlight the varied services that students require based on their specific needs.

This variation is clearly evident when evaluating students’ ambitions, as defined by the reach and purpose themes. In terms of reach, most participants stated an interest in a career sector and a minority expressed a particular goal that they were committed to; examples included careers in Islamic economics, becoming a university lecturer and establishing Brunei’s first solar panel company. Ambitions were largely determined by areas of personal interest, as well as familial expectations and, to a lesser extent, friendship and social networks.

This supports the idea that students’ ambitions were guided by exposure to different professions; one student from Indonesia was keen to become a barista after watching videos by professional baristas on YouTube. Several students also applied to roles they saw on LinkedIn although they were unaware of the existence of such positions before.

However, as most students simply referred to the sector they would apply to, in the absence of any clearly articulated goal or specific motivation,

ambitions cannot be considered to be particularly high. Several participants had only settled on their goal in their final year of university, suggesting in general a more laid-back approach. Many also expressed a societal sentiment of 'going with the flow', which many confirmed by stating their willingness to take whatever job is offered, rather than cultivating high aspirations. Such students lack the purpose to be positioned on the top-right quadrant of Figure 1, and so have not attained true *himmah*.

The findings additionally indicate that purpose is a prerequisite to having high reach. The minority of participants who did articulate a clear goal also had a strong motivation behind their ambition. Those who did not have an exact career path in mind also spoke passionately about the importance of their chosen career sector, the desire to support their family, or religion as a driving force. They had some level of purpose behind their interest, even though they lacked high reach. However, there was no student who was expressed a high reaching ambition but lacked purpose. This suggests that, as per Figure 1, high aspirations must be based on an underlying purpose. Many students had strong motivations, but failed to go the extra step and articulate a clear goal.

In relation to *himmah*, the varying levels of *ilm* and *quwwah* among the participants pointed to students falling into two main groups. On the one hand, participants expressed a feeling of general uncertainty amongst their peers, including those who had a preferred career industry in mind. This speaks to a lack of awareness of the overall process of job seeking; thus, students in the first group have *tamannah* – a vague hope – but are unaware of the course of action they must take in order to achieve their goal. They occupy the top left quadrant of Figure 2.

This was particularly evident among students in Indonesia who did not feel prepared to enter the job market, citing external factors on one hand, such as steep competition, the need for connections, and a lack of capital, and on the other, a lack of emphasis on employability skills in their degree programme and poor career advice. This explains why students who participated in an internship or work project unanimously found the experience beneficial by exposing them to what they considered real work situations. This is indicative of a combined lack of *ilm* and *quwwah*; students lacked some degree of knowledge as to how to make themselves

stand out, which led to low confidence, and in turn resulted in few having the strength of intention needed to apply for jobs.

However, on the other hand, most students had no clear reason as to why they had not started any kind of preparation for applying to prospective jobs. In each focus group, students were notably keener to share their plans for their prospective period of short-term unemployment than their attempts made at securing employment. This again highlights a lack of *quwwah* that, in many cases, was compounded by the lack of a clearly defined goal. Students in the second group are in a state of *wahm*, or delusion; they have the knowledge to start at least a basic job search, but lack the strength of intention. They can be considered to occupy the bottom right quadrant of Figure 2.

With regards to religion, the findings highlight the widespread impact of Islam on students' reach, but more so on purpose and well-being. In every focus group, participants mentioned the importance of contributing to a certain field in the spirit of Islam, especially those who wanted to enter a field related to Islamic finance or other religious disciplines. Islam acted as guidance for the kinds of careers they aspired towards, with several participants conscious of certain roles that would be considered impermissible, such as those that involved *riba* (usury). Religion was also a source of consolation in the event of unemployment. This suggests that rooting an intervention in Islam can aid in improving both well-being and strength of purpose.

## **7. Implications for policymakers**

These findings present several implications for both policymakers and tertiary education institutions. Firstly, students' ambitions need more clarity in order to be actionable. Greater exposure to different roles, as well as harnessing the passion most students had for their degree major, can stimulate higher aspirations and motivations. Secondly, the attention students gave to religion suggests that this could be used to enhance a sense of purpose behind their chosen role.

Thirdly, external economic constraints and concerns about education quality suggest that a joint strengthening of *ilm* and *quwwah* is necessary. Students require additional, job search-specific support in order to increase their confidence and help them stand out against other competitors. This

could include guidance on writing cover letters, interview performance and enhancing soft skills. Additionally, the use of alumni, already a trusted resource, to guide and motivate students through a mentorship scheme would be an effective way to ensure students are making progress.

However, it must be emphasised that the range of issues demonstrated in the findings point to the need for flexibility in these solutions. Given the range of positions that students can occupy on both the graphs of *himmah* and *rajaa*, a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. Some element of personalisation will be crucial for raising individual aspirations and strengthening *quwwah*.

## 8. Conclusion

This research set out to establish the prevailing attitudes and behaviour toward graduate unemployment in Indonesia and Brunei. Using the themes established by the Islamic literature regarding aspirations and actions – namely, reach, purpose, *ilm* and *quwwah* – it evaluated four focus groups with final year university students.

The findings of this study suggest that students lack *'uluww ul-himmah*. While most participants spoke of a career sector they had in mind, few demonstrated evidence of a clear ambition or a high reach. Most participants demonstrated strong purpose, whether driven by a desire to provide for their family, their personal interest or religion, suggesting purpose is a prerequisite to cultivating a high reach. However, these students did not go as far as to match their reach and purpose in a defined goal.

A significant lack of *quwwah* was observed amongst participants; few had started a job search or made an effort to secure temporary work or internships. There was often more preparation for an expected period of short-term unemployment than efforts made towards job seeking. This again corresponds with the Islamic literature on *rajaa*; few students had both the knowledge and strength of intention to work towards their goal.

The role of religion as a source of purpose and its potential to improve well-being during periods of unemployment was another key finding of the focus groups. This supports the premise of this research, namely that

grounding interventions in religion would be beneficial as it appeals to the existing beliefs and persuasions of students.

This research suggests that a flexible approach is required in order to build upon the areas that are lacking for particular students. Some level of personalisation, ideally through mentorship, would fit this description. Interventions should focus on giving students' ambitions more clarity and rooting purpose in religion more firmly. Finally, in order to work towards *rajaa*, students must be supported through the process of job seeking. Formalising channels through which alumni can offer guidance on job search strategies, applications and interviews would help students overcome their apathy and enter the job market as confident graduates.



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