

**SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION
EXPERIENCES AMONG HOSPITALITY
GRADUATES: A HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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**ASIA e UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the school-to-work transition (STWT) experiences of hospitality graduates in the selected Private Higher Education Institutes, focusing on how they have constructed, adapted, and sustained their early careers within the hospitality sector. While existing research in hospitality education has focused on employability outcomes, limited attention has been given to the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions shaping graduates' real-world transitions. The study involved 14 participants, comprising Malaysian hospitality graduates (8 females and 6 males) aged 24 to 30. Participants represented a diverse range of hospitality departments, including room divisions, food and beverage service, supporting departments, events/retails management, and revenue management. All had completed tertiary education in hospitality and had worked in at least one operational or managerial role since graduation, offering insight into both linear and non-linear career trajectories. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was adopted to explore participants' lived experiences through in-depth interviews. Data were thematically analyzed in three interpretive stages aligned with the research objectives: hospitality education experiences, actual transition processes, and outcomes of transition. The analysis was guided by Gadamer's interpretive framework of the 'fusion of horizons,' allowing the researcher interpretation to evolve with participants' narratives. Findings indicate that graduates often enter the field with passion and idealism but face significant misalignments between academic preparation and workplace realities. The school-to-work transition (STWT) was marked by emotional labour, unclear job expectations, and gaps in technological and managerial competencies. Despite these challenges, many graduates developed coping strategies such as seeking informal mentorship, leveraging soft skills, and redefining career goals. Support networks, structured onboarding, and experiential learning played critical roles in fostering resilience and career sustainability. These findings directly address literature gaps by shifting attention from attrition to the experiences of those who persist in hospitality, highlighting how cultural context and post-pandemic realities shape transition outcomes. A key contribution of this study is the development of an evidence-based Conceptual Model of navigating STWT in Hospitality Graduates, integrating social cognitive career theory, experiential learning, and career development theory. Building on this, the study proposes the **PIVOT** Strategy - **P**urpose, **I**nstitutional Influence, **V**enture, **O**vercoming, and **T**riumph as a practical guide for enhancing STWT outcomes. This contribution extends existing career theories to the Malaysian hospitality context, providing actionable insights for curriculum development, industry partnerships, and policy interventions.

Keywords: School-to-Work Transition (STWT), Hospitality Graduates, Career Adaptability, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Graduate Employability

APPROVAL

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

Name: Karen Lui Koon Ling

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Karen Lui Koon Ling', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Signature of Student:

Date: 19 August 2025

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

AeU	Asia E University
CDT	Career Development Theory
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
F&B	Food and Beverage
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GVATI	Gross Value Added from Tourism Industries
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HTM	Hospitality Tourism Management
MAH	Malaysian Association of Hotels
MCO	Movement Control Order
MQA	Malaysian Qualifications Agency
MQF	Malaysian Qualifications Framework
SCCT	Social Cognitive Career Theory
STWT	School-to-Work Transition
WIL	Work-Integrated Learning

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of Study

The global hospitality and tourism industry has long been recognized as one of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy. It continues to demonstrate consistent expansion, not only in terms of economic contribution but also in the diversity and complexity of services offered. This growth has, in turn, propelled stakeholders across the sector, including governments, educational institutions, and private enterprises, to invest significantly in delivering effective, high-quality training and educational programs designed to cultivate a competitive and competent workforce (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). These initiatives aim not only to enhance service quality but also to attract, nurture, and retain skilled talent capable of navigating the dynamic and demanding nature of hospitality work environments.

In Malaysia, the tourism and hospitality sector holds a strategic and vital position in the national economy. As highlighted by Shaliza et al. (2023), the sector contributed a substantial RM240.2 billion in Gross Value Added from Tourism Industries (GVATI), making up approximately 15.9% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as of 2019. This underscores the significant dependence of the Malaysian economy on tourism-related activities, including accommodation services, food and beverage operations, travel agencies, and recreation-based enterprises. However, the emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 severely disrupted this momentum. The nationwide enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the spread of the virus led to the temporary closure of borders, hotels, restaurants, and tourist destinations. Consequently, the tourism and hospitality

sectors suffered a staggering loss of approximately RM3.37 billion within just the first two months of the lockdown period (Dzulkifly, 2020). The crisis exposed structural vulnerabilities within the industry, particularly in terms of workforce stability and the fragility of employment pathways for new entrants and recent graduates.

The transition from formal education to the workforce - commonly referred to as the school-to-work transition (STWT) - is a multifaceted and often protracted process, particularly in sectors characterized by volatility and high labour turnover such as hospitality. STWT is not always linear; it can involve periods of underemployment, job-hopping, or temporary disengagement from the labour market. Research by Grosemans et al. (2020) suggests that this phase is frequently marked by uncertainty, fluctuating motivation, and a heightened risk of job insecurity. For many graduates, securing meaningful employment that aligns with their training and career aspirations can take considerable time and perseverance.

Moreover, the quality of the STWT and the likelihood of accessing stable, dignified, and fulfilling employment are influenced by a complex interplay of social, institutional, and psychological factors (Akkermans et al., 2021). These may include the availability and relevance of industry internships during education, the presence of mentorship and guidance, the perceived value of hospitality qualifications, and the mental resilience of the graduates themselves. Unfortunately, much of the existing research in hospitality education has concentrated primarily on attrition rates and the factors driving graduates away from the industry. While this line of inquiry is important, it leaves a significant gap in understanding: the experiences of those who choose to remain and build their careers within the sector. Investigating these successful transitions can offer critical insights into how institutions and employers

might better support graduate retention, professional growth, and long-term career satisfaction.

In response to this gap, this study was grounded in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, aiming to uncover and interpret the lived experiences of hospitality graduates as they navigate the transition from academic environments into the world of work. The research was structured around a three-stage theoretical framework that directly aligns with the core research questions and facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the transition journey. These three stages are: (i) the hospitality education experience, which considers the role of curriculum, training quality, and institutional support in preparing students for real-world challenges; (ii) the actual transition experience, focusing on the initial encounters with employment, adaptation to workplace culture, and the challenges of professional integration; and (iii) transition outcomes and coping strategies, which examine the long-term implications of the transition and the mechanisms employed by graduates to sustain their careers in hospitality. Together, these stages form a coherent analytical lens through which the multifactorial dynamics of school-to-work transitions can be better understood, both in the Malaysian context and beyond.

1.0.1 The Transition from Higher Education to Work

The transition from higher education to work is a critical phase that shapes graduates' professional identity, career development, and future employability. While students may receive varying degrees of academic and practical preparation during their studies, the shift from structured educational settings to the dynamic and often unpredictable world of work can be overwhelming. Graduates are expected to immediately take on real job responsibilities, adapt to workplace culture, and manage

performance expectations. For many, this transition can bring about confusion, uncertainty, and a lack of coping skills, all of which are closely linked to career satisfaction and retention.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), there were 5.29 million graduates in the country in 2019, with 83.5% participating in the labour force and 3.2% unemployed. However, employment alone does not guarantee a smooth or sustainable transition. Many graduates find themselves underemployed, misaligned with their academic training, or struggling to adapt to the realities of the workplace (Ismail et al., 2021). In particular, industries such as hospitality, where the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical expectations remains a long-standing issue, are especially affected.

In the context of Malaysia's economic development, there is a growing emphasis on producing highly skilled human capital that can contribute to national competitiveness. Human capital is understood as a combination of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes that enhance an individual's productive potential (Islam et al., 2016). Higher education plays a fundamental role in cultivating this capital. However, the alignment between higher education and industry expectations remains inconsistent across sectors. The hospitality industry, for example, continues to grapple with the mismatch between academic preparation and workplace demands (Hewitt, K., & Sao Joao, E. (2022)). As mentioned, the mismatch between graduates' skills and the needs of the labour market is a significant challenge. To bridge this gap, universities should collaborate more closely with industries to ensure that curricula remain relevant and up to date (Peter, 2025).

Motivational and human resource factors also influence how students perceive their future roles in the industry. A study by Harun et al. (2023) found hospitality students exhibit a positive view of career opportunities in the growing tourism and hospitality sector in Malaysia, recognizing its focus on emerging trends. This diverse landscape offers a variety of roles, from sustainable tourism to digital innovation, igniting students' enthusiasm for dynamic career paths. This perception signals a promising future for the industry as it continues to grow and align with the aspirations of students.

As highlighted by Mpangeva and De Braine (2024) graduates undergo a three-phased transition as they become familiar with workplace complexities. The graduate programmes facilitate this transition, they help graduates negotiate between identities to adjust and fit into the organization. The quality of onboarding experiences, mentorship, and institutional support during this period significantly impacts their career trajectories and retention within the industry.

Therefore, understanding how hospitality graduates experience the transition from higher education to work is important. It not only informs curriculum development and career guidance but also provides insights into how to support sustainable career pathways in an industry known for high turnover and low retention among young professionals.

1.0.2 School-to-Work Transition (STWT)

The transition from school-to-work is increasingly recognised as a critical and complex phase in the development of young adults, particularly in developing countries like Malaysia. It is not a single, linear event, but rather a prolonged and evolving process shaped by individual readiness, labour market conditions, and

sociocultural expectations. As Whalley et al. (2024) describe, the STWT can be frustrating and uncertain, especially when new graduates encounter the sharp contrast between the structured academic environment and the often ambiguous demands of the workplace. The lack of formal mentorship and ongoing professional development opportunities contributed to feelings of uncertainty and frustration during their transition into professional roles.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2019) notes that school-to-work transitions are not uniform - young people may study while working, experience periods of unemployment, or cycle through multiple short-term jobs before securing stable employment. Thus, STWT should be seen as a journey that ideally leads to productive and decent work, but in practice, may involve stops, delays, and detours. In hospitality and service sectors in particular, this transition can be even more turbulent due to emotional labour, irregular hours, and unclear career pathways.

In Malaysia, the formal education system follows the 6+3+2+2 model, and those who pursue tertiary education typically spend up to 16 years in formal learning. A university degree is often regarded as a pathway to job security and upward mobility (Cheong & Narayanan, 2020; Yaakub et al., 2019). Similar perceptions are found across other Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, where higher education is seen as a tool for social advancement. However, completing a degree does not necessarily equate to successful labour market integration, and many graduates face a delayed or difficult transition into meaningful employment.

Recent statistics from Malaysia indicate growing concern. Although the Ministry of Education uses a six-month benchmark to assess graduate employability, an increasing number of graduates take longer than this period to secure their first

permanent job (Cheong & Narayanan, 2020). This delay poses not only economic consequences but also emotional and psychological stress on graduates navigating an already competitive labour market.

The Khazanah Research Institute highlights the struggles faced by Malaysian youth aged 15 - 29 in both rural and urban settings in making the leap from education to employment. As Abel and Deitz (2024) reported, extended detachment from the labour market leads to greater difficulty in re-entering and adapting to productive employment. This issue raises important questions about the readiness of graduates and the role of higher education in preparing them for industry realities.

In Malaysia, most STWT programmes are tailored to assist students with special educational needs, helping them to build early work skills and develop a better quality of life post-education (Zainal et al., 2019). While commendable, such initiatives are less developed for mainstream graduates, who are often expected to be self-directed and independent in securing employment. This growing expectation of self-responsibility in career development underscores the urgent need for structured support and guidance for all graduates, including those from conventional higher education backgrounds.

The hospitality industry in Malaysia presents unique challenges in the STWT process. Although hospitality education has existed for over four decades, the industry continues to experience a shortage of skilled labour and high turnover rates (Pusiran et al., 2020). This may be linked to graduates' unrealistic expectations, shaped during their studies and internships, which do not align with the realities of the hospitality work environment (Pusiran et al., 2020). The mismatch between education and industry continues to be a persistent issue in this field.

Given Malaysia's global position as a top tourist destination, with international recognition for shopping, wellness, and cultural experiences, the hospitality sector is expected to thrive. However, for this growth to be sustainable, attention must be given to the transition experiences of hospitality graduates. As Pusiran et al. (2020) argue, the rapid expansion of hospitality education and industry demands must be accompanied by pedagogical reforms and career development strategies that support graduates in bridging the gap between academic preparation and workplace expectations.

Therefore, understanding how graduates experience and navigate the school-to-work transition in hospitality is not only timely but essential. By capturing these experiences, this study aims to provide actionable insights for students, educators, and employers to foster smoother transitions, stronger retention, and more sustainable career development in the Malaysian hospitality industry.

1.0.3 Hospitality Graduates' Perspective Towards the Hospitality Industry

Hospitality graduates are expected to enter the industry, however, it is not always the case. The phenomenon of hospitality graduates leaving the industry has been widely studied from multiple perspectives and across disciplines. The hospitality industry always faces the challenges of not being able to retain hospitality graduates. A critical concern is the high attrition rate among hospitality graduates, particularly within the first five years of employment, a trend that poses persistent challenges for the industry (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023).

Long working hours, low starting salaries, and lack of work-life balance are consistently cited as leading causes for this early departure (Grobelna, 2022; Gupta, 2019). Operational roles - often the entry point for graduates - are perceived as

undesirable despite years of academic preparation, as they are associated with repetitive tasks and limited autonomy (Michael & Fotiadis, 2022). Consequently, many graduates find the transition from theoretical learning to labour-intensive roles misaligned with their career expectations (Chen et al., 2021).

According to industry feedback from the Industry expert, Group Director of Learning and Development for Kuala Lumpur Hilton groups (2022), he commented that few hospitality graduates survive in the hotel industry for more than five years and build long-term careers in the hotel industry. Those who stay in the industry are classified as ‘survivors’, but what makes them survive? General Manager from Ritz-Carlton Macau (2021), highlighted the concerns of a lack of qualified hospitality trained graduates joining the industry, as very few graduates from South East Asia were showing interest in joining the hotel industry.

Moreover, student perception and weak career intention remain central to the problem. Studies indicate that many students enroll in hospitality programs without a strong desire to pursue long-term careers in the industry, often using the degree as a stepping stone rather than a commitment (Lee & Chao, 2013; Wang et al., 2024). The result is a widening skills gap, where the industry is increasingly deprived of trained professionals just as demand continues to grow post-pandemic.

1.0.4 The Hospitality Industry Problems

The hospitality industry is a service industry which requires manpower to run the operation, which therefore, well-trained and educated people are needed (Hussien & Lopa, 2018). The phenomenon that hospitality graduates are leaving the industry during the STWT is not new.

Despite the hospitality industry being recognized for offering abundant employment opportunities, it was frequently criticized for low wages, limited prestige, and high employee turnover (Wahab et al., 2020). Such negative perceptions often deter graduates from pursuing long-term careers in the field, as many view the industry as unstable, lacking clear pathways for advancement, and offering little transparency in promotion practices (Richardson, 2008; Chan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the seasonal nature and perceived job insecurity of many hospitality roles further diminish their attractiveness as sustainable career options.

The hospitality industry is focused on skills-based workforces; the educators are churning out graduates with higher competency. They are not only competent in skills but are also equipped with higher-order thinking skills. The evidence is reflected in the hospitality programme outcomes. Most graduates wanted to start their careers with a higher ranking in the organization hierarchy. They commented, ‘my pocket money is more than my salary, this deters them from sustaining in the industry. This sentiment undermines both retention and morale, as graduates are reluctant to start at the operational level, despite it being the traditional entry point into the industry (Yong et al., 2021).

From the hospitality educators’ perspective always queries the reason for this continuity of the phenomenon of students not joining the industry, the relevancy of hospitality education is questionable instead. The growing gap between education outcomes and employment realities calls into question the relevance and adaptability of hospitality education to evolving industry demands (Barron & Maxwell, 2019). Over the years, there is limited studies on where hospitality graduates ended up with their career and how they go through their STWT to succeed in their career. This

research aimed to focus on the industry ‘survivors’ lived experience in STWT. What makes them survive through this period?

1.0.5 Stakeholders’ Perspective towards Private Hospitality Education and School-to-Work Transition

It is costly to pursue higher education in private institutions in Malaysia. According to EduAdvisor (2024), the 18 to 36-month programme can cost from USD4,450 to USD16,275 for the course in the humanities and USD5,000 to USD 17,4000 for science. But bear in mind, this is just the beginning of tertiary education. If students go on to a degree programme, the cost can vary widely. Looking at popular courses like business, the total estimated cost of studying can range from USD9,300 to USD44,200. These costs are typically borne by families, who perceive education as a crucial investment in future stability and status (Cheong et al., 2018).

Hospitality is among the more popular programs offered in Malaysian institutions of higher learning (Soo, 2022; Cindy, 2021). However, despite the strong supply of hospitality graduates, the Malaysian hospitality industry continues to struggle with attracting and retaining young professionals (Zahari et al., 2014). One core issue is the persistent negative perception among youth toward careers in the industry - many associate hospitality jobs with long hours, low prestige, and seasonal instability (El-Houshy, 2018; Kuslivan & Kuslivan, 2000). These perceptions are further reinforced when companies, in a bid to control labour costs, rely heavily on part-time or gig workers during peak periods, limiting permanent job opportunities (Tay & Mohamad, 2022).

One of the biggest concerns from parents is the return on investment, parents may see education as an investment. Parents of private tertiary students are more