



Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA)

Voices of Youth: A Conversation on Employment

Youth Perception Study:

A Qualitative Study of Malay/Muslim Youths



By Nabilah Mohammad

Voices of Youth: A Conversation on Employment
Youth Perception Study: A Qualitative Study of Malay/Muslim Youths
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About the Publisher

AMP Singapore

AMP was established on 10 October 1991, as an important resolution of the First National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals held between 6 and 7 October 1990. The Convention was attended by 500 Malay/Muslim professionals who met to brainstorm new directions for the community. AMP was formed with core programmes in education, human resource development, social development and research.

AMP is a registered charitable organisation and is accorded the status of an Institution of Public Character.

AMP is guided by its core principles of being independent, non-partisan and working in critical collaboration with all parties that share its mission to bring about a Dynamic Muslim Community in the 21st Century. AMP will partner with any player who identifies with and supports its mission in society and will support government policies that serve to advance the community and the interest of the people at large.

Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA)

As a research subsidiary of AMP, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) conducts research in key areas such as economics, education, religion, family, social integration, and leadership and civil society.

RIMA contributes to scholarly discourses on numerous issues relevant to the community. They organise conferences and seminars to add depth to discourses and to create awareness of issues. Roundtable and focus group discussions are also held to foster greater understanding of issues and keep abreast of emerging trends. RIMA has produced several publications and contributed articles in both print and online media.

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At the heart of this study are the contributions of 29 participants who generously shared their personal stories, aspirations and perspectives on employment. We are, thus, indebted to them for their trust, courage and honesty.

List of Abbreviations

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ITE	Institute of Technical Education
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
MMO	Malay/Muslim Organisations
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
NITEC	National Institute of Technical Education Certificate
NS	National Service
NYC	National Youth Council
RIMA	Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs

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Executive Summary

Young people are crucial stakeholders in the pursuit of decent and productive work. Yet, too often, their voices remain unheard and their viewpoints unshared. The Youth Perception Study is intended above all to explore Malay/Muslim youth issues mainly through the experiences of young people themselves.

Over 40 years, the human capital of Singapore's youths has improved in tandem with the nation's growth. For instance, youths are increasingly taking up jobs while still in school. This helps them with their subsequent transition from school to workplace (National Youth Council, 2014a). As a result, more youths in Singapore are able to achieve high standards of living, given increased employment opportunities (National Youth Council, 2014b).

However, can the same be said about Malay/Muslim youths? What do they think about the future job market, employment opportunities and how their current work experiences have shaped their perception?

This study, which was conducted from 2017 to 2019, is part of a research on youth within the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore. It is aimed at gathering insight into how young people think about issues, choices, opinions and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variations that exist in beliefs and experiences. The study asserts that young people's perceptions of themselves and the world around them are pivotal for where they turn to for help and for the choices they make.

Specifically, the study was designed to identify general trends in the perspectives held by youths through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The study sets out to examine the nature of barriers to employment faced by young people and offers recommendations to help them take advantage of job opportunities. This report also illustrates the challenges faced by young people in matching their aspirations with the skills they have. This fills an important gap in our understanding of young people's worldviews. This paper also briefly reviews the demographic situation in the Malay/Muslim community and its impact on employment. The aim is to draw attention to the importance of demographic

changes and highlight the need for action to bring about potential benefits to both working and non-working youths.

Prior to this study, we conducted an FGD and a series of in-depth interviews to explore the general concerns of youths among the Malay/Muslim community. Based on the information derived from the initial study, we discovered that employment was the most pressing issue among our respondents. An online poll by The Straits Times also showed that young people are interested to talk about issues surrounding the job situation (Rashith, 2018).

A total of 29 respondents participated in this study. The interviews and FGDs aim to add greater understanding of employment challenges faced by Malay/Muslim youth in Singapore.

The study is initiated on the premise that there is the need for a more nuanced understanding of the ways youths view their own circumstances, particularly as a Malay/Muslim youth in Singapore. The objective is to gather insights into youth perceptions and experiences. By understanding the pathways of influence through which attitudes and values are proliferated, the study hopes to adduce the necessary information for stakeholders to design new programmes and adapt proven interventions for youth development.

The report begins with a background of the research and the methodology employed. Findings and data are subsequently presented. The report ends with some preliminary analysis and conclusions drawn from the data and offers recommendations for the way forward.

Employment

When it comes to employment, many of the participants shared similar concerns. They expressed anxiety over job security, citing the prevalence of short-term contracts; low wages, amidst rising costs of living; difficulties in obtaining adequate practical work experience; and few opportunities for workplace advancement. They also questioned the value of education they and their peers received — whether it is still relevant to the jobs

available; how their knowledge and skills can serve them in the long term; and the extent to which decision-makers are committed to investing in young people. They were frustrated with prolonged unemployment and underemployment. When they were finally employed, many were plagued by poor wages and long hours. In addition, job insecurity and lack of benefits often left them unable to meet basic living expenses.

More than half of the study's respondents were pessimistic over prospects of climbing up the socio-economic ladder. Our respondents also expressed their worries about seeking employment in an increasingly competitive environment and how the rapidly changing global economic landscape will have an impact on Singapore's labour market. Most participants acknowledged that there have been a wider spectrum and greater number of job opportunities for their generation. But these were outweighed by everyone else being just as competent and skilful, thus making job opportunities more competitive.

Higher levels of education generally lead to better labour market outcomes. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that some of our polytechnic and even university graduate respondents felt that they still face challenges in career progression as compared to their peers of other races, notwithstanding educational qualifications. Some even experienced difficulties securing gainful employment or found themselves persistently underemployed (which may, in turn, crowd out youths with lower skill sets). Their disappointment and frustration, after having been told that higher education is the track to success, are compounded by their additional years in school and the burden of student debt. Some of the participants also felt that, as Malay/Muslim youths, they are at a disadvantage in the labour market, especially in jobs such as banking, which requires good literacy in Mandarin.

Most respondents from lower academic backgrounds were either unemployed or regularly held low-paying jobs. They believed that they were given less employment opportunities as compared to the other races because of their education. Participants from this group saw foreigners in Singapore's

job market as additional barriers to their already difficult access to career opportunities, job security and promotion. This is more for lower-skilled jobs, majority of whom are foreign talents.

Nevertheless, the participants realised that the Malay/Muslim community has improved over the years. The younger generation is now better equipped with qualifications and is in a much comfortable position to thrive in Singapore's economic landscape.



Part I Introduction

Section A: Harnessing the Youth Bulge

Considering an ageing demographic, investing in young people is now critical for significant social and economic impact and, in the Malay population's case, a youthful population structure. Listening to and understanding the priorities of our youths mean that we can progress in ways that harness the potential of the young, taking into account their real needs and opportunities. Understanding how they perceive their lives and future is an important aspect of our work on youth development, particularly when realities and perceptions do not align.

In Singapore, there are about 1.5 million youths aged between 15 and 34 years (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2017a). They account for approximately 26.8% of Singapore's resident population. The National Youth Council (NYC) uses this age parameter to define 'Youth' in its statistics publication, *Youth Statistics in Brief* (National Youth Council, 2018).

In Figure 1, there is a widening gap between the percentage of youths in the general population and in the Malay community. While the percentage of youths in Singapore has declined slightly over the past decade, the percentage of Malay youths has increased.

In 2018, youths comprised 32.9% of the Malay community as compared to 31% in 2008, whereas the percentage of youths in the general population has declined from 28.6% in 2008 to 26.4% in 2018.

The percentage point difference between youths in the Malay community and the national average jumped markedly from 2.4% to 6.5% (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2017c). As seen in Figure 2, in 2017, the Malay community indicates a relatively youthful population structure, compared to that of the general resident population. Social scientists label this demographic profile as the 'youth bulge', referring to young people making up the highest proportion of the population (Ortiz and Cummins, 2012).

FIGURE 1: GENERAL POPULATION OF YOUTH VS MALAY YOUTH

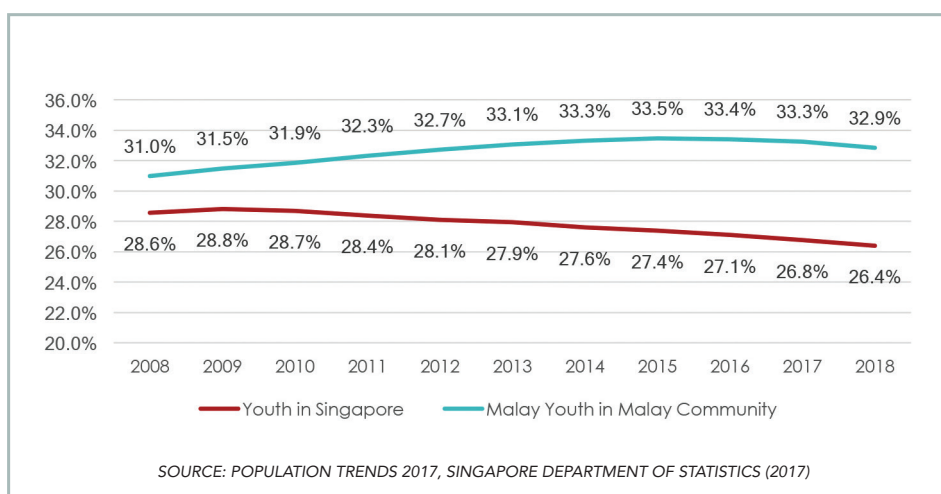
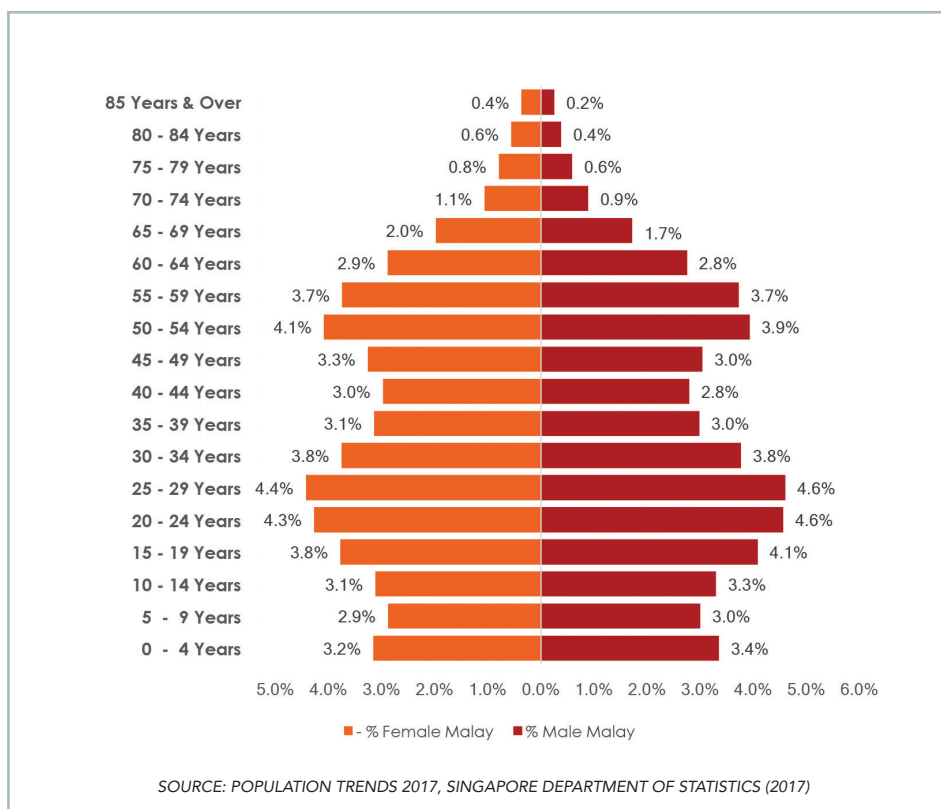


FIGURE 2: POPULATION PYRAMID OF SINGAPORE MALAY RESIDENTS IN 2017



The Youth Bulge Theory contends that societies with escalating young population raise the potential for high unemployment and large pools of discontented youths who are susceptible to joining fringe groups (Beehner, 2007). Being born into a large youth cohort usually means heightened competition and fewer employment opportunities. This, in turn, leads to low self-esteem and mounting frustration. Therefore, there is lower opportunity cost for youth to engage in insurrection activities. This is a scenario akin to a demographic bomb (Beehner, 2007).

While frustration and competition for jobs do not directly cause violence, they do increase the incidence of unemployed youths seeking social and economic advancement by alternative, extralegal means (Beehner, 2007). While a large youth population does not by itself lead to instability, youth bulges can exacerbate existing societal tensions and conflict causes (USAID, 2007).

Indeed, the predominance of young adults present social challenges, chiefly, whether there will be sufficient job creation to meet the large cohort of youths entering the labour market in the next decade and more. If there exist labour market restrictions that limit youths' access to job opportunities, then activities such as insurrections will, by relation, appear dangerously attractive to young people (Grossman, 1991). They may also turn to freelance or gig economy jobs, which may undermine career trajectory. According to Labour MP and National Trades Union Congress Assistant Secretary-General, Mr Zainal Sapari, working in the gig economy,

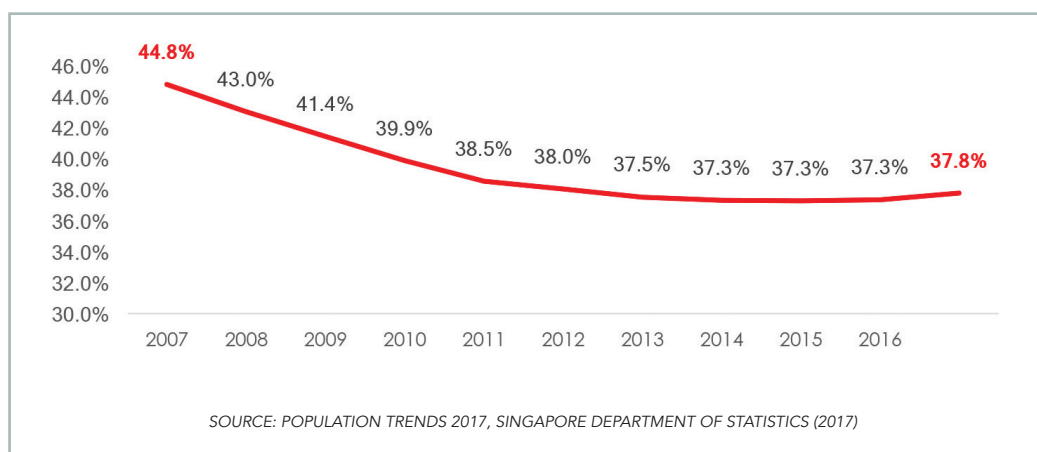
especially as a permanent job, has little prospects in terms of skills upgrade or career progression (Yuen, 2019). He also added that there is the danger of younger workers getting used to the job and being lulled into complacency such that they do not look for better prospects.

This is not to say that the relatively significant proportion of youths in the population is a bad thing for the economy. Whether demographic pressures actually raise the possibility of social unrest depends on the politico-institutional setting of society (Kelly and Schmidt, 2005). A large youth population can be a huge boon for the economy if we capitalise on this economically productive group. This is known as the 'demographic dividend', defined as economic growth that tends to follow increases in the ratio of the working-age population — essentially the active workforce — to dependants (Ssewamala, 2015).

The demographic dividend is deemed a potential source of growth. Economists have long recognised that a large cohort of young workers can provide a demographical boost to growth in economies where the productivity and savings of young people support smaller sub-populations of children and the elderly. For instance, as young adults enter working age, the dependency ratio — that is, the ratio of the non-working age population against the working age population — will decline.

As shown in Figure 3, the total dependency ratio for Malay residents, which is the number of dependants (persons under 15 years and over 64 years old)

FIGURE 3: TOTAL DEPENDENCY RATIO OF SINGAPORE MALAY RESIDENTS



calculated as a percentage of the working age population (15-64 years), has declined from 44.8% in 2007 to 37.8% in 2017. If the number of working age persons that can be fully employed in productive activities increases, all other things being equal, average income per capita will correspondingly increase. The youth bulge will then become a demographic dividend for the Malay/Muslim community.

Former World Bank Chief Economist, Justin Yifu Lin, explains that the conventional approach to managing a youth bulge is to make young people job-ready through investment in human capital to enhance productivity in the labour market (Lin, 2012). In addition, the extent to which large youth cohorts incur the risk of conflict is generally dependent on the flexibility of the labour market, business regulation, political institutions, and ethnic tensions (Gerling, 2018).

Indeed, with a younger age profile than the general population, the share of employment of Malay youths is expected to increase. Recognising this demographic trend and effectively addressing the needs of youth are pivotal for the future.

The next section briefly examines the employment situation of the youth in Singapore.

Section B: Brief Outlook of the Youth Employment Situation in Singapore

Figure 4 shows that the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of youths under 30 has largely remained stable over the years. According to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the relatively low LFPR is accounted for by the tendency of young people to stay longer in school. This suggests that the educational profile of the youth labour force has improved over the years (Ministry of Manpower, 2017).

According to a 2017 National Youth Survey, *The State of Youth in Singapore*, approximately half of the respondents believed that a bachelor's degree is needed to secure a decent job in Singapore. They also believed that the key to achieving success in life lies in a mix of hard work, luck and connections. In regard to income expectations, a majority of the respondents expected an income of more than \$2,000 from their main occupation (National Youth Council, 2017).

As in other countries, Singapore youths experience a higher unemployment rate than the general workforce. However, while most countries are plagued with youth unemployment crises, Singapore boasts one of the lowest overall youth unemployment and long-term unemployment rates in the world (Morris, 2006).

FIGURE 4: AGE SPECIFIC RESIDENT LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

	AGE 15-19	AGE 20-24	AGE 25-29	AGE 30-34
2015	15.8	65.3	90.3	90.2
2016	15.3	62.3	90.3	90.8
2017	14.2	62.2	90.2	91.8

SOURCE: YOUTH STATISTICS IN BRIEF 2018, NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL (2018)

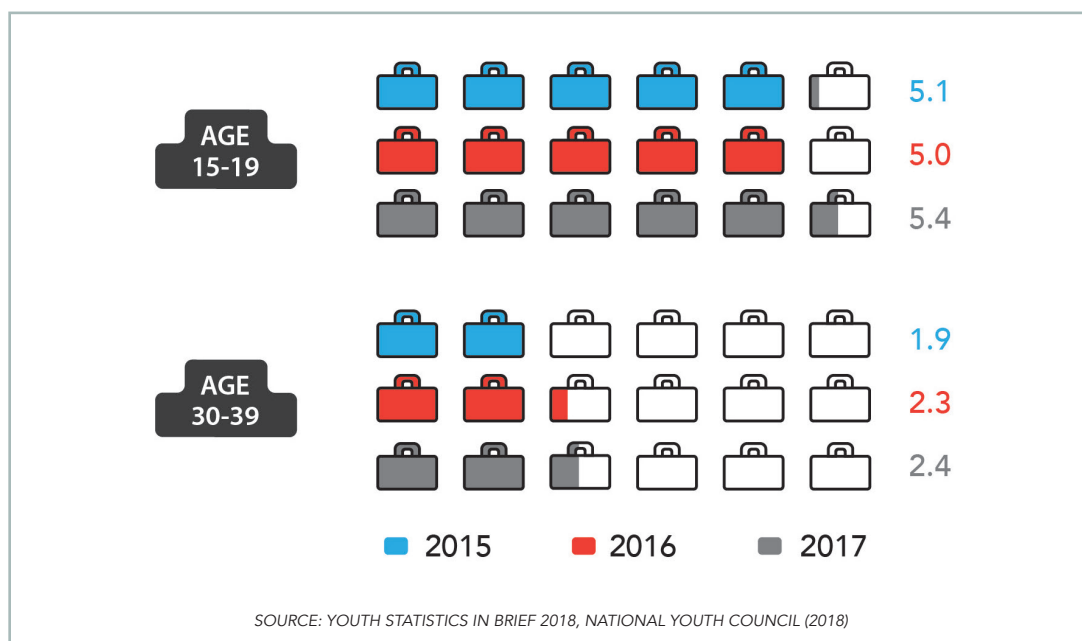
According to the latest NYC study, as illustrated in Figure 5, the annual average resident unemployment rate for youths under 30 in Singapore is about 5.4% in 2017 and 5.0% in 2016 (National Youth Council, 2018).

The percentage of Singapore youths who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) is also one of the lowest internationally at 4.1% in 2016 (National Youth Council, 2018). Unlike the youth unemployment rate, which takes into account the number of jobless people among those actively searching for work, NEET includes those who have dropped out of the labour force altogether. According to International Labour Office (ILO), youths who fall under NEET are vulnerable, as they are at risk of unemployment and social exclusion (International Labour Office, 2013).

conditions, having unrealistic expectations, and mismatch of job skills may have led to the rise in NEETs among Singapore youths (Yuen, 2019). Young graduates are also facing difficulty accessing work that commensurates with their qualifications and aspirations (Ho, 2016).

According to a joint graduate employment survey by Nanyang Technological University (NTU), National University of Singapore (NUS), and Singapore Management University (SMU), the percentage of fresh graduates from NTU, NUS, and SMU to land a permanent full-time job within six months of graduation declined in 2016 as compared to the year before. The survey also found that the median starting pay for fresh graduates in full-time

FIGURE 5: ANNUAL AVERAGE RESIDENT UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



Employment Concerns Among Singapore Youths

Current evidence indicates that young people in Singapore are facing particular problems and challenges in both gaining access to the labour market and finding secure employment (Cheng, 2017).

Experts shared that factors such as higher job expectations on top of uncertain economic

employment grew more slowly as compared to previous years (Mokhtar, 2017).

These hurdles are also faced by private university graduates. Besides difficulty in getting a job, private school graduates are getting considerably lower salaries than their counterparts from public universities. In another graduate employment survey for the Private Education Institution (PEI) conducted by the Committee for Private Education,

PEI graduates have a harder time gaining full-time jobs than their peers in Autonomous Universities (AU) (SkillsFuture Singapore, 2019). The survey found that 48.2% of fresh graduates from private schools in the 2017/2018 cohort secured full-time jobs six months after graduation, compared with 81.2% of public university graduates. The survey also showed that the median gross monthly salary of PEIs' fresh graduates remained at \$2,650, compared to \$3,500 for AU fresh graduates. Fresh graduates of PEIs also face the highest levels of unemployment or involuntary part-time/temporary employment at 27.2%, compared with 9.3% for fresh AU graduates. So, while job prospects for fresh graduates from PEIs have improved slightly, they continue to lag behind those of their peers from the AUs.

A difficult transition to the working world has a long-lasting impact on not only young people but also on their families and communities. If experienced at an early age, it threatens a person's future employment prospects (International Labour Office, 2013).

The Changing Landscape of Work

As Singapore's economy continues to grow, diversify, and evolve, the conditions under which people are employed are also changing.

Today, there are fewer polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates in full time jobs compared to a decade ago. According to a Ministry of Education (MOE) survey on the employment rates of polytechnic and ITE graduates, the number of polytechnic and ITE graduates in full-time permanent employment fell from 77% in 2007 to 58% in 2016, a decline of 19 percentage points (Kotwani, 2018). According to Senior Minister of State for Education, Janil Puthucherry, about half of this decrease is due to students choosing to do part-time work while they prepare for further studies, with the other half due to graduates choosing not to engage in full-time permanent work (Kotwani, 2018). He explained that they could be doing freelance work or have other reasons leading them to work part-time or take up temporary employment.

Singapore's youths are also now growing up in a different world, characterised by unprecedented change fuelled by the proliferation of technology

and digital innovation, which has significantly altered the nature of work. The rise of the gig economy, for instance, which is powered by the proliferation of smartphones and the Internet, has birthed an entirely new category of employment that continues to grow in depth and breadth. Gig workers can independently seek employment on an ad hoc basis, without being confined within the structures of a company or organisation. Throughout the ages, we have always had people working in gig economy jobs that cover the full spectrum of freelance work, from providing professional services, such as IT professionals and designers, to offering lower skill-sets yet essential services such as cleaning and delivery (Lim and Ng, 2017). However, technology such as mobile applications have now made it easier than ever to freelance.

A growing proportion of Singapore's workforce, including the young graduates, is now gravitating towards freelance jobs offered by the gig economy (The Straits Times, 2017). About 47% of the ITE graduates, 35% of polytechnic graduates, and 10% of university graduates went into part-time, temporary or freelance jobs in 2017, doubling the percentage from the previous decade (The Straits Times, 2017).

Gig economy companies burst onto the Singaporean scene about five years ago, led by ride-hailing firm *Uber* and followed a year later by food delivery provider, *Deliveroo*. Some figures indicate large numbers of young people are choosing to work as food delivery riders and ride-hailing drivers, which are new-economy jobs enabled by companies using technology to bring together services, providers and hirers (Baharudin, 2019). In a parliamentary reply in March, Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan also provided an age breakdown of private-hire drivers and vocational licence-holders in which 44% were between the ages of 20 and 39 (Ministry of Transport, 2019).

There are several characteristics attributed to the gig economy that appeal to the younger workers including flexibility, autonomy and decent pay, which are competitive with many entry-level jobs for educated younger workers (Chong, 2019). However, according to Dr Walter Theseira, an Associate Professor of Economics at Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) and Nominated Member of Parliament, these gigs offer less job security and career prospects. He explained that there is no career

path in gig jobs and that the jobs do not provide workers with significant marketable skills (Chong, 2019). Gig workers also face uncertainty about future revenue and are not receiving medical benefits that a traditional worker would get (Hartung, 2019). Thus, while the gig economy can liberate workers from the constraints of a 9-to-5 job, these jobs leave gig workers in a vulnerable position due to the lack of labour protection and opportunities for skills training, eventually limiting their social mobility (Yuen, 2019).

Job requirements and skill profiles are also rapidly changing. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, for instance, are set to impact our lives including transforming the way we work. According to the World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report (2016), the accelerating pace of technological advancements and socio-economic disruptions are altering industries and business models on a significant scale. Most notably, such disruptions saw the transformation of skills in demand and decreases the shelf-life of current skill-sets. Roles such as sales, customer support and market research, for instance, are predicted to “most likely” be replaced by AI as they are highly susceptible to automation (Teng, 2018). In addition, by 2020, over a third of the desired core skill sets of most occupations will comprise skills that are not yet considered crucial to the jobs of today (World Economic Forum, 2016).

In a survey by the World Economic Forum and regional Internet firm, Sea, Singapore’s youths are among the most pessimistic in the region about the impact of technology on their employment prospects and earning potential (World Economic Forum, 2018). The findings of the survey showed that only 31.2% believe that technology will increase the number of jobs available and about 53% of Singapore’s youth felt that technology will reduce the number of jobs available.

Indeed, the workforce is experiencing a paradigm shift with an unprecedented, unpredictable and consequential acceleration of change sweeping across industries. If managed wisely, these transformations could lead to a new age of good jobs and improved quality of life for our youths. On the other hand, if managed poorly, these changes pose the risk of widening skills gaps, greater inequality and broader polarisation (World Economic Forum, 2018). Against these backdrops, it is critical for us to

ensure that our youths are positioned to navigate this disruption and remain relevant.

Part II Research Methodology

Section A: Sampling

A total of 29 economically active Malay/Muslim youths aged 18 to 35 years old participated in this qualitative study using FGDs and in-depth interviews. This included 17 men and 12 women of diverse age, academic background and employment status. The data collection period spanned from June 2017 to December 2019.

Although NYC defines youths as those between the age of 15 and 35 years, in undertaking this study, we selected youths between the age of 18 and 35 years since for most, their working careers would have started. Most of the youths that were in the range of 15 to 18 years would still be in school, which account for the insignificance of their employment status. In addition, according to a report by NYC, older youths formed the majority of the economically active youth — 62.6% of youths between the age of 20 and 24, 90.2% of youths aged between 25 and 29, 91.8% of youths between the age of 30 and 34 and only 14.2% of youths aged between 15 and 19 were economically active youths (National Youth Council, 2018). Furthermore, age restriction provides a more coherent group, which makes comparison between the subjects more relevant. Additionally, males usually enter National Service (NS) at the minimum age of 18 and would not have started work or gained much employment experience.

In choosing the sample of participants, we used a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling method.

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that enables us to select sampling units within the segment of the population with the most information on the characteristic of interest (Guarte and Barrios, 2006). Purposive sampling is used to increase the variation among the participants in terms of age (within the age interval), gender, academic background, ethnicity (Malay) and employment status. This sampling method is essentially strategic and necessitates an attempt to establish good



correspondence between research questions and sampling (Mirza, 2012).

Participants are recruited through posters advertising, which was posted and distributed in public places and disseminated through social media platforms. Some participants also referred us to other respondents.

We adopted several strategies in the recruitment of interviewees. A poster with the eligibility criteria, our contact information, and monetary incentives was designed and posted in the lifts of Pasir Ris East Community Centre. The poster was also disseminated via online social networking platforms such as *Facebook*, *WhatsApp* and *Messenger*. We also encouraged friends, acquaintances, and potential participants who had expressed interest, to provide referrals for the research. For confidentiality reasons, we did not ask participants to provide their names or phone numbers of eligible individuals. If eligible participants indicated they had friends or family members who are also eligible, we sent them

e-posters to distribute via *Whatsapp*, *Messenger* and *Facebook*. In this manner, potential participants were free to decide whether to contact us.

No participant was excluded for any reason. All participation was voluntary and informed consent was received. All participants received monetary tokens for their participation.

Section B: Data Collection Method

The study used a multi-method approach — FGDs and in-depth interviews of selected youths. The FGDs and in-depth interviews sought to obtain information on a variety of issues including employment concerns and challenges, and their aspirations.

Participants were either recruited as participants for a FGD or an in-depth interview depending on their demographics. The participants of our study were from diverse backgrounds. Such diversification has been chosen carefully so that opinions of our respondents are as representative of the youth population as possible.

The FGDs were conducted with youths who had at least a diploma qualification. Youths from a variety of social contexts — varying on age, gender, and educational level, were targeted for inclusion. Additional in-depth interviews were also conducted among youths belonging to this academic group.

We did not conduct any FGD for youths with Higher National ITE Certificate (NITEC) qualification or below, as most of them were not comfortable to share their experiences in a group setting. Instead, in-depth interviews were conducted for all of them.

The interactive aspect of the FGDs and in-depth interviews allows us to gather clear answers from our respondents and to probe further whenever necessary. As FGDs and in-depth interviews also allow for more flexibility, we were able to capture nuances in their experiences that will otherwise not be adequately captured had we employed a quantitative approach.

Both FGDs and in-depth interviews took around 60 to 90 minutes to complete and were digitally recorded and transcribed. At the beginning of the

FGDs and interviews, research goals and methods were explained to the participants.

Section C: Data Analysis Procedures

Tape recordings of FGDs and single-person interviews were transcribed and analysed. A preliminary analysis was conducted in order to get a general sense of the data, such as common insights among the respondents before detailed analysis was carried out. The data were then divided into segments or categories that reflected specific thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of participants. Data from all youth groups were analysed for major themes and labelled as key findings.

Data from each participant group were also analysed separately to determine trends unique to each group. It is important to note that concerns identified in this report emerged in both FGDs and in-depth interviews. Additionally, there were largely agreement over these issues and consistency in how the issues were discussed among groups. In instances when an issue was addressed by all groups but talked about differently among them, these differences are identified and explained.

Section D: Ethical Considerations

All participants signed a consent form, received an information sheet stating what the objectives of the research were and their rights as participants of the study. Informed-consent procedures were explained at the beginning of each FGD and subsequently, after the distribution of consent forms and the participant information sheets. All FGDs and interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and the anonymity of participants in the FGDs. It is clear to all participants that their participation were voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

A strict code of ethics was applied before, during and after data collection to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. As a result, all quotes presented in this paper are anonymously attributed.

Section E: Overview of Respondents

Youth aged 25 and 29 make up the largest group of our respondents. The average age of participants in this study is 27 (minimum = 21 years, maximum = 35 years, standard deviation = 3.6 years).

Our respondents come from diverse academic background. As recorded in Table 1, slightly more

than half of our respondents have at least a diploma or GCE A-levels and above, while the rest holds a NITEC qualification and below. Majority of our respondents are employed in different occupations, and presented very different perspectives and feelings on the research topic.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percent	Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Gender			Academic Qualification		
Male	17	59%	Below Secondary	1	3%
Female	12	41%	N-Levels	1	3%
			O-Levels	6	21%
Age			A-Levels	1	3%
20-24 years old	6	21%	NITEC	3	10%
25-29 years old	18	62%	Diploma	12	41%
30-35 years old	5	17%	Degree & Above	5	17%
Employment Status					
Employed	20	69%			
Unemployed	9	31%			



Part III Key Findings

This section provides an overview of the situation of our youth respondents in the labour market together with comments from our participants stemming from actual experience and observation. The key findings include our participants' employment-related perceptions, attitudes, awareness and predicaments. Analysis of data show several themes cutting across the FGD and in-depth interviews. A number of key indicators were used to assess the perspectives of our youth participants on their employment prospects. The answers are presented below in Figure 6, divided into four sections indicatively to facilitate further analysis.

Quotations included in this section were quoted verbatim, or marked as translated when comments were originally in Malay.

FIGURE 6: PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF RESPONDENTS



Section A: Wages and Workload

Our youth respondents are broadly concerned that there are few opportunities for decent work. The clear message among many of our participants is that when they do obtain jobs, it involves poor wages as well as poor working conditions, including heavy workload, long hours, having few or no prospects for advancement, and lack of benefits.

For some respondents, holding a low-wage job may not be particularly problematic: Think of a 23-year-old diploma holder in an entry-level position with a strong career arc ahead of him, or an administrative assistant with a higher-earning spouse. In these cases, a low-salary job is transitory or not the worker's primary source of income. However, majority of our respondents lamented not earning enough to meet the high cost of living in Singapore.

More than half of our respondents with a Higher NITEC qualification or below, who rely entirely on their low salary to support themselves and their families, found it difficult to save. Two respondents even resorted to borrowing from banks, friends and moneylenders in order to meet monthly expenses. For this group of respondents, they are vulnerable in the labour market, and are perceived to be unlikely to advance to higher-paid jobs due to their academic qualifications.

Majority of our participants with a Higher NITEC qualification or below also highlighted that it is hard to get a response from employers in their job search, unless their salary expectation is lowered. They felt that employers tend to overlook their years of experience. Some of our respondents shared that they had to resort to accepting wages lower than their last drawn salary as illustrated in this quote:

"I have to lower my expectations because I know my education level is not high, just NITEC, but I have 3-4 years of experience working as an admin, and the job I applied for is an admin position. So why isn't my experience enough to prove that I deserve the pay that I'm asking for? But I just accept the job, since I'd rather have a job that pays less than be unemployed."

One female respondent who had an N-level qualification shared:

"I didn't negotiate when the salary offered was lower than my expected pay as I was afraid the employer would reject me if I negotiate for a higher salary."

An interesting observation from the study is attitude towards sustaining a job despite the workload and wages among respondents.

For instance, a point that emerged from our participants with Higher NITEC qualifications or below, was they would rather be active than to "sit around" and be unemployed. These participants shared that they had to bear with the conditions of under-employment or heavy workload only because they believe that their perseverance, experience and enthusiasm will be rewarded in the future. In fact, with the exception of two participants, all respondents with Higher NITEC qualifications or below were employed at the time of the study.

Meanwhile, almost half of our participants with a least a diploma qualification was unemployed during the study. Most had limited job opportunities and shared they prefer to remain unemployed than accept what they consider were undesirable jobs, which most defined as "lousy" pay or heavy workload. One of our respondents who took such jobs eventually quit:

"I came in as an untrained special needs teacher and my management promised to send me for training when I started work. However, six months into the job, I was already thrown to the floor with seven students under me, but never got the training. The job scope was overwhelming, but the pay was just okay. I eventually left the job as I couldn't handle the workload."

For participants who worked in the private sector, many expressed difficulties in securing bonuses and salary increment despite having worked for a

substantive period of time in a company. Even if such were offered, they invariably came with additional responsibilities. This made them feel that they have been short-changed instead of being rewarded for their performance. A number of participants also have had current and/or former employers not paying their salaries and CPF promptly. In such situations, they often do not know what legal recourse there is.

Older youth respondents who fall within the latter end of the 18- to 35-year-old range also complained that employers should not be paying them a monthly salary of less than \$2,000, like what the younger workers are paid. The older youth participants with a Higher NITEC qualification and below, for instance, shared that despite their lower academic background, they have more expenses to bear especially if they are married and have housing loans to service, as illustrated in the following quote:

"I was working freelance for an early childhood company... their pay when I join until now is the same. The pay that they are offering me is \$8 per hour. I can't take it at this age. It's tiring because you have to 'entertain' kids running around all the time. You got to please the customers who are their parents and all that. \$8 per hour, sorry to say, it works if I'm 17, not when I'm 35. I have so many bills and loans to pay, so I decided not to take that [job]. What I did instead was to find more work or create more work for myself that paid me properly."

Most participants, who cited low wage as a concern, shared that they have to work overtime or turn to other ways to earn extra income. Some participants expressed interest in running 'pop-up' businesses or other microbusinesses using e-commerce platforms such as *Carousell*. They also identified the creation of small- and medium-sized enterprises as one important and effective means to overcome low wages and poor working conditions.

However, some participants shared that there are bottlenecks associated with starting a business. Majority of our respondents shared that information and guidance on entrepreneurial initiatives, as well as financing opportunities are difficult to access.

Several participants shared the lack of information and resources in starting businesses.

For respondents with a driving licence or are at least in the process of applying for one, gig economy jobs with low entry barriers offered by major players such as *Grab*, *Deliveroo*, and *Foodpanda*, are perceived to be viable opportunities to earn additional income on a part-time basis. One participant put it as:

"I am taking my driving license and my dad encouraged me to use the license for extra income. Since my cousin tried Grab and she got to earn extra income, I don't mind trying because my current job doesn't give overtime pay."

The frustrations expressed by our respondents reflect their lack of bargaining power and how they are poorly positioned to improve their situation.

Two of our respondents with degrees mentioned that they are satisfied with their job and contented with their salary. They also shared that their work experiences have been in line with their interest. One of them shared:

"I am satisfied with my job in terms of the income and job scope. I like what I am doing at work. In addition, the benefits my company offer are good. Currently, I do not face any problems in keeping my job. Although, I am working long hours, I do prefer the shift pattern that my company offers."



Section B: Treatment and Relations

Another theme that arose was how the Malay/Muslim youths respondents perceived workplace relations and the treatment they experienced as an employee or job applicant. Besides salary, participants believed that the next primary factor in determining job satisfaction is, their relationship with colleagues, clients, and management.

Majority of our respondents who claimed they were underpaid shared that while they were paid low wages, there were instances when they chose to remain with the company because of positive work experiences and having an employer or manager who was understanding and considerate. This was often followed by having helpful and cooperative colleagues who were a pleasure to work with. In addition, although rare, some participants shared instances where employers will guide them on career prospects by introducing them to worthy contacts, rewarding them monetarily, or even allowing time off from work should they face personal or family problems. Those who cited these examples, however, added that all of the above is probably possible because the company is small and less hierarchical.

Perceived Discrimination from Colleagues and Employers

Nevertheless, most participants asserted that the more common experience they had was witnessing discriminatory behaviour among hirers, employers, colleagues or clients. Such episodes include managers finding fault with Malay employees while being lenient to non-Malay employees when mistakes were found, and managers turning a deaf ear to complaints from Malay employees as expressed by the participant below:

"Sometimes, my boss display favouritism, especially towards the non-Malay staffs. For instance, if we expressed any issues to the manager, who is a non-Malay, they won't do anything to help us. It's unfair. If we are stressed, who do we turn to? Shouldn't it be the boss?"

Instances where colleagues formed cliques that exclude Malays from social gatherings were also reported, as quoted by one respondent as follows:

"Sometimes the higher management won't approach me. They will approach my Chinese colleague, maybe because they are more experienced than myself so I just stayed that way [I didn't voice out], but I don't know really know the reason why. I'm uncomfortable. When there are gatherings held, it's just among their race."

There were also instances when the Muslim attire, such as the hijab, become an issue for clients and colleagues, or when non-Malay colleagues perpetuated stereotypes about Malays. One female respondent, who is an early childhood educator, said:

"There is still some unfairness as some employers dislike employing Muslim ladies wearing a hijab. They also feel that praying during working hours causes disruption or misunderstandings."

There were some cases where job search was difficult by what participants perceived as hirers being discriminative towards them. One participant cited:

"One engineering company called me up for an interview for the admin assistant position. The office was open concept, so I could see staff working and I saw that none of them were Malay. During the interview, they don't seem interested to ask me questions to know more about myself or my experience. At the end of the interview when they open up for questions, I asked them why there are no Malay employees and they asked me back, 'Why does it bother you?' It felt like I was uninvited, and they called me for interview maybe because they have to reach a quota of Malays to interview or else, they can be accused of discrimination."

Another participant shared her experience with her non-Muslim ex-employer who found her halal dietary requirements troublesome:

"I work in the fashion industry and my job involves a lot of travelling. I'm the only Malay/Muslim in the company. Once, I was travelling with my boss and he brought some food over for me to eat but I told him I can't eat them because it's not halal and then he said, 'This is the reason why I don't want to employ Malays.'"

Similar sentiments were shared by a recent survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies — OnePeople.sg on racial and religious harmony (Ho, 2019). Almost 60% of Malay/Muslim respondents perceived discriminatory treatment at work; a slight increase from the 58.7% in their previous study. The minority groups reported that they felt discriminated against when applying for jobs or seeking a promotion. The survey also showed that minorities were perceived to be disadvantaged at work, with almost 32% of all respondents saying Malays had to work harder or much harder than someone of another race to reach the top in their company.

Besides our respondent's perception of being discriminated along racial lines at the workplace, it is also interesting to note that most of them also attested to the experience of wealthier and higher-ranking Malay colleagues, clients and customers treating them unfavourably. According to participants, this was evident in deliberate attempts to avoid conversations and their tendency to stick only to members of their own "class". Occasionally, disparaging remarks were heard or when a particular person raked up instances when assistance was provided to less well-to-do Malays, as illustrated in the following quote:

"I visited my previous workplace at the library where I used to work as a shelver. My supervisor is more educated than me. I think she is a diploma holder. When she saw me, she smirked and asked me sarcastically, 'Still doing low-paying jobs that have no future?' I was offended, and I told her that I was doing office work. Upon hearing

that, she tried to claim credit by saying, 'I told you so many times, go upgrade yourself and get a decent job. Now finally you heed my advice and see for yourself how your life has improved'. I can't handle those kinds of 'atas' (elitist) and arrogant Malays who look down on their own kind."

Many participants expressed disappointment because they observed that unlike what they had experienced, their non-Malay counterparts were treated better by their non-Malay superiors. One participant put it:

"The Chinese are different. I used to have a Chinese boss. The Chinese bosses find people who they can help while the Malay bosses wait for people to ask them for help. And if they helped you once, they will constantly remind you they helped you before, as though I have to be indebted to them forever."

Many participants acknowledged that their networks are small and limited, and are aware that expanding networks in the workplace, and having worthy contacts are important for access to future opportunities. However, the barriers to those opportunities continue to be discriminatory treatment on grounds of race and class.

Nonetheless, some participants pointed out that there are Malays who were exclusivists. They are comfortable with remaining in their own 'bubble', and were not keen to leave their comfort zone, as illustrated in the following quote by one respondent:

"And one thing I noticed amongst my friends, a lot of them have trouble wanting to interact with people from other races, especially the Caucasian types. They lack self-confidence. It's not about that you know. You have to understand that at the end of the day, humanity is equal. You speak the language; interact. Things like eye contact, tone of voice, are enough. You can struggle with your English, but if

they want to listen to you, they will listen to you. They will make effort to listen to you, but you [need to put in effort to be taken seriously]. This is the stumbling block."

Despite the largely negative landscape portrayed by participants, there was hope. One of our respondents shared:

"My relationship with my employer is a very open and professional relationship. My agency has 29 offices around the world, so my relationship with the agency is great. My relationship with my Managing Director for the Singapore office is extremely positive. I am able to set career targets with support."

Another respondent also shared similar sentiments about his positive relationship with his employer:

"I do believe that I've built a healthy and good relationship with my superiors during the seven years of my service in the company. They trust and have confidence in my work skills and knowledge to perform tasks that are entrusted to me."

Section C: Experience vs Qualifications

With the exception of two participants who believed that an O-level certificate is sufficient to land a good job, the rest of the participants believed that employers are looking for employees with at least a diploma qualification or are willing to pay a higher salary only if one had attained a diploma or higher.

This was a bitter pill to swallow for participants with Higher NITEC qualifications or below, who lamented that their years of experience are now rendered useless. They argued that experience and good performance are deserving of higher salary, and that salary should be pegged to work experience and not solely on their educational qualification. As such, they were reluctant to switch industries, even if a particular industry was booming, as that would mean settling for a huge pay cut on their academic

background. It also meant not being able to put their long experience to good use.

Most of the respondents with Higher NITEC qualifications or below were frustrated that employers are generally keen to employ someone having higher educational qualifications but with lesser experience. They believed that having more experience would mean that they will be able to perform better at the job, while the candidates without experience but with higher educational qualification still need to be trained. Moreover, time is needed for one to get used to performing tasks efficiently. Hence, these participants were unable to fathom why they should be limited by income ceiling because of their educational qualifications. They questioned why employers rather pay more for a better-educated candidate for whom training resources need to be allocated, over someone who was already familiar with the job. This frustration was captured by one of our respondents:

"You hire a polytechnic diploma holder with zero experience but you pay her higher. That's nonsense! I wouldn't do that if I'm an employer. The diploma holder can be more educated but when it comes to doing admin job, she still has to re-learn and get used to the things she needs to do. Sometimes companies need to pay money to send her for courses and it takes a lot of time to wait for her to get used to her job. By then, the company has lost out in getting a lot of work done in the admin side. I'd rather hire a less educated person but has more years of experience on the job. I know she won't need much time to get used to the duties and she can do things faster. I pay her a bit more than her previous salary but I get to save more money on training and time if I hire people like myself. But now, if I ask for a pay raise, my boss will tell me that for my education level, that's the highest they can pay me. [Then my years of experience that make everyone's job easier is for naught?]"

Job Mismatch

The focus among our respondents with at least a diploma was educational output and relevance to labour markets. While some positive comments were shared, the overall consensus was educational qualifications were still insufficiently tailored and aligned to the dynamic needs of the labour market.

One of our diploma holder respondents shared:

“A Diploma used to be a decent qualification but right now, even a degree would not guarantee you a good job. ITE students can make it better than poly students due to hands-on knowledge they acquired in school.”

Majority of our respondents with at least a diploma raised the challenge of having an educational qualification that is not directly relevant to the type of work they do or used to do, and how their knowledge and skills will serve them in the long-term. In fact, several participants are doing jobs or had done jobs that do not match their field of study.

Other participants, however, conceded that they are also fickle-minded about the jobs they want to do. As a result, some tend to gravitate towards temporary economic pursuits such as setting up stalls during the Ramadan season or performing at wedding events.

Most respondents who had at least a diploma qualification also viewed higher educational institutions as inadequate in meeting the needs of the labour market. They reported that formal education curricula are overly theoretical, leaving them and their peers ill-prepared and lacking practical skills for actual work. Some resorted to delaying their entry to the job market by continuing with their studies or by seeking out low-level jobs.

More positive views were shared of non-formal education such as skills-related courses including cooking, photography or learning a foreign language, which our youth respondents believe can complement formal education. Further, participants ascribed value to vocational education as a means for job preparedness, notwithstanding concerns that it may not lead to decent work.

Overall, participants argued that more partnerships are needed between institutions of learning and employers. Although our respondents acknowledged the existence of career guidance in schools, most shared that this was not enough. The consensus was that schools expand the scope of education by providing job searching guidance and equipping students with skills in negotiation and networking, or skills required for the rapidly changing labour market.

They agreed that improved career guidance for youths will be effective in helping one decide on appropriate course of study, essentially one that supports their interests. Those who agreed suggested that such partnerships should start at secondary school level where students have to choose their educational path after receiving their O-level results. Taking into account their interest in a particular field of study or the career path they are comfortable with, they can then make an informed decision (either an ITE, polytechnic or junior college education) that is suitable with the career they aspire to have.

This issue provided us information on transitioning from education to work. It was evident that most participants with at least a diploma were taking up jobs that were unrelated to the course of study from which they graduated. The mismatch between their choice of career and educational qualification adversely affects job search and employability. Participants further explained that they had taken courses due to parental pressure — which compounded the mismatch.

That said, two participants who had experience working in the Food and Beverages (F&B) industry claimed their low educational qualifications played an insignificant role in their career. They shared that in the F&B industry, hard work and talent, along with apprenticeships and recommendations, are important factors in a person getting ahead and landing oneself with well-paying offers. This is illustrated in the following quote:

“I’ve never faced that experience before. I think I’m quite lucky or blessed. It has never been an issue. Every single employer I’ve worked with, they have never said anything about my education. In F&B, it’s because they rely more on my experience. Every time I switch a job, it’s either due to promotion or recommendation.”

However, they expressed that the halal fine-dining sector is only just picking up. Hence the opportunity to earn well may still be limited unless one opts for similar experience in non-halal fine-dining restaurants.

One respondent who has a degree expressed his satisfaction with his certificate-related job:

"I am satisfied because I secured my current job quite soon after I graduated from university. Within two months of graduation, I secured an internship with my agency. After three months internship, I was offered a full-time job as an account coordinator. I've been with my agency for two and a half years and am now an account executive. Another point of satisfaction is that my degree in public relations is being utilised and I now have a steady income from my career."

Section D: Threats and Challenges in Sustaining or Getting a Job

The views conveyed in this section include our youth respondents' experiences in looking for a job and keeping their existing job.

Participants believe that being Malay and not having high academic qualification exposed them to higher risks in keeping their jobs or even getting a job. For instance, most who were already employed are at risk of suffering from discriminatory practices such as managers finding faults and denying them promotion opportunities. In the worst cases, participants reported leaving their jobs, and consequently, fail to establish a consistent employment record.

Others had also pointed out that foreigners pose threats to their jobs, especially in companies seeking to cut costs. They believe that companies would rather hire a higher-educated foreigner who is willing to be paid less than local non-diploma holders. The quote below by a NITEC-qualified youth respondent underscores the point:

"Sometimes, it doesn't matter if your qualification [is] high or low. For companies that focus on cutting costs, they only care about hiring cheaper. If you have NITEC or higher, [the] company needs to pay you \$1.6 - 1.7k per month and they need to contribute your CPF. If they hire a higher-educated foreigner who is willing to be paid lesser than you, of course the company would want the foreigner because they don't have to contribute any CPF and they have a smarter worker."

One of our older youth participants who had an O-level qualification felt that he was losing out to fresh ITE graduates. He shared that his job, once a niche job, is now rendered mainstream when ITE offered courses in that field. Employers also seem to prefer them over older youths, as they are cheaper to employ, having just started out in their career. Compared to experienced youths who expect a higher salary, fresh ITE graduates seem an attractive option to hirers. One participant put it:

"My role as a visual merchandiser used to be very important but right now even the salesperson can do my job. I feel less important because of the rise of e-commerce. Even ITE now has a certificate in visual merchandising. In my time, they don't have this visual merchandising course. They are hiring cheaper because they are fresh graduates. Now when the company hire, they will see me as this 35-year-old asking for a salary of \$2.5 to \$3k, and then you have this young fresh ITE graduate who is asking for \$1.8k. Of course they will hire the younger guy. That's why I have to lower my salary expectation before I could get calls from job agencies."

In addition, participants also cited the ineffectiveness of job portals and online employment agencies such

as *Jobstreet*, *Job Search* and *Jobs DB*, in helping them secure jobs. They shared that job postings attract a high number of applicants and hence they had to wait for months to get responses.

One respondent with a NITEC qualification, for instance, felt that when companies upload job postings and place, “NITEC/Higher NITEC/Diploma” alongside with Diploma qualifications under ‘Eligibility’, they are unwittingly raising false hopes. From the view of participants, these companies almost never respond to those with lower educational qualifications, as illustrated by the following:

“These job agencies always give me false hope. When I applied for a job at the hospitals or PSA for instance, the advertisement stated that the highest qualification includes NITEC. I have a NITEC qualification. You can see the advertisement now; a lot of these jobs include NITEC/Higher NITEC/Diploma side by side. But when I try to apply, I never get.”

A quick job search online leads us to some of the job advertisements below in Figures 7 & 8.

Besides online job portals and employment agencies, most participants were aware of government-funded job assistance platforms, with some mentioning that they had heard about Workforce Singapore (WSG) or NTUC’s e2i centres, or had come across the former Workforce Development Agency (WDA) roadshows. In any case, none have used the services of these platforms nor did they explore opportunities through roadshows when they encounter difficulty in looking for jobs. The complexity of the system, some said, is a reason why they are confused about what help is available and how to get it.

Also, it was found that most of the participants did not have any network of contacts or referrals when looking for jobs. For them, their network constitutes mainly Malays of similar occupational, educational and income background. This left them with limited resources at their disposal.

Some participants, however, do acknowledge that they and their friends may well not make the cut to work in certain industries. Factors cited include lack of confidence and below average English proficiency. The result is mainstream jobs and job security are preferred over those that require hard work but pays lucrative commissions and bonuses.

FIGURES 7 & 8: TYPICAL ADVERTISEMENTS FOR NITEC JOB OPENINGS

1 Year Aerosol Technician (\$2k to \$3k) - Min NITEC/Diploma in any engineering course
Recruit Express Pte Ltd

Salary: [Login to view](#)

Job scope:

- To prepare and run the experiments in the control room and study the background of aerosol technical aspects.
- To execute daily work within the control room:
 - control room operation
 - routine maintenance of pumps, SM, ventilators
 - study set-up (glassware)
 - qualification of smoke protocol
 - test smoking
 - aerosol measurement
 - instrument calibration check
- To assist in planning of test substance preparation and conditioning.
- Assist in development of standard operating procedures and work instructions
- To prepare daily report
- To run experiments to study the background of aerosol technical aspects.
- To assist in configuring the control room data acquisition application(s) as needed.
- To ensure the cleanliness in the working environment
- To organize and conduct the practical aspects of additional measurements such as particle size determination.

Requirement:

- Min NITEC/Diploma in Electrical/Electronic/Mechanical/Mechatronic Engineering or any related courses
- Able to start work immediately
- Able to commit 1 year
- No experience needed as training will be provided. Those with engineering experience will be advantageous.

SOURCE: JOBSCENTRAL, 2020

JOB DESCRIPTION

**US Semicon Company looking for 8 Months Temp Electrical Engineer !!!
Apply Now!!**

Location: Serangoon North (Free transport pickup @ AMK station)
Working Hours: Every Mon - Fri, 830am -530pm
Salary: \$1700-Nitec | \$1950-Diploma * With completion bonus!!

Duties & Requirements

- Assemble & test wire bonder machines
- Troubleshooting and rectification of machines
- Set up and calibration according to engineering specification
- Must use hand tools to assemble machines and electrical equipment
- Must be able to read circuit diagram, manufacturing instruction
- Must be comfortable to work overtime
- Immediate starters only
- Nitec/Diploma in any engineering field
- Do have relevant experience in dealing with wire bonding machine

*Singaporean ONLY

SOURCE: JOBSTREET, 2020

On a lighter note, several participants with a degree shared positive experiences with regard to keeping their job. One of the participants shared:

"I don't face any form of threats as my job security is determined by performance. The influx of foreign talent doesn't affect me because I'm one of the senior team members and have been performing at a high level."

Another degree holder shared similar job security sentiments in his workplace:

"I do not face any threats in keeping my job as the percentage of foreign and local employees are quite balanced."

Section E: Career Aspirations and Perceptions of Malay/Muslim Youths in the Workplace

Participants were also asked about how they thought Malay/Muslim youths were faring in the workplace. There were both positive and negative outlooks perceived towards Malay/Muslim youths in the workplace.

"In five years, I see myself as an account director at another agency. I'm not entirely sure where I will be, but given the timeline and career growth for my profession, I am aiming to be an accounts director."

Majority of our youth respondents remained optimistic about their own future. However, they tend to be pessimistic about the future of the younger generation as a whole as captured in the quote below:

"I think we can do better. I feel that there is a lot more potential for the Malay/Muslim youth than what they are achieving now. I think two things need to be addressed: 1) settling; and 2) giving up. By settling, I mean that the Malay/Muslim youth I've met have settled for what they think

is okay, they have the potential to go further but they've settled with what they have because they [perceive that there is] favouritism against Malays. And by giving up, I mean when the going gets tough, it is easier to give up than finding alternatives. During my National Service days, I met so many individuals who are exceptionally talented but they are not prepared to pursue their talents."

Having said that, there was also positive feedback shared on the employment prospects of Malay/Muslim youths in Singapore. One respondent was confident that these youths were faring positively, at least from his workplace experience:

"I think Malay/Muslim youth in my workplace are faring very well because they are holding quite important positions and roles in the organisation."

Given their personal experiences, majority of our respondents with diploma qualifications or above felt that more Malay/Muslim youths were seeking employment in informal sectors. Although the informal sector is a buffer during tough times, it also means lack of access to social security, rights at work and, decent working conditions. In addition, temporary or informal jobs are a stepping stone to better-quality work for highly-educated youth. However, for others – particularly those with low levels of education – it is all too often a trap (O'Higgins, 2017).

According to the Singapore Department of Statistics (DOS), the informal sector refers to self-employed individuals who engage in production activities and are not included in business surveys, for example, hawkers, taxi drivers, real estate agents, freelance tutors and babysitters (Yew et al., 2014).

This group of respondents also felt that Malay youths have less specific goals for their future, and that they are fickle-minded or unsure of the jobs they want to do. Participants in this group also tend to compare and model the mindset and attitude of Chinese youths, as echoed in the following quote:

“Other races are more supportive within their community. For example, if a Chinese person opens a restaurant, their friends who come to support will pay full amount without asking for a discount. Malays will ask for a discount. Our community tends to be more calculative when it comes to business.”

That being said, according to the majority of the respondents, there is a growing swell of young Malay/Muslim entrepreneurs starting small businesses; some out of choice and others out of necessity. One participant said that the Malay/Muslim youths today are more innovative and are more willing to take risks, especially in starting a business. According to the respondent, although it appears that there are many unemployed youths in the community, there are many in this group who are actually making money through other means, such as running small businesses or performing gigs.

Section F: Community's Support Base

Role of Malay/Muslim Organisations

Participants were asked for their opinions on the help Malay/Muslim Organisations (MMOs) can offer youths in their employment. Their response was they were not adequately informed of any services MMOs provide that can help them in looking for jobs. Some participants indicated that MMOs need to reach out more in order to accurately ascertain areas of concern and challenge as regards employment.

Majority of our participants expressed hope that MMOs can do more to help them in the following areas:

1. Provide career guidance and counselling so that our respondents will be informed of existing schemes and the measures needed to achieve career goals;
2. Provide job-matching services for Malay/Muslims because many felt that current job portals and employment agencies are helping non-Malay/Muslim applicants more than them. Also, jobs made available to them have little

relevance to their educational training and past experience;

3. Offer advice on action to take when employers or colleagues are discriminative or when companies are repeatedly late in paying salaries;
4. Organise resume writing and interview skills training for job seekers; and
5. Introduce top-up schemes for individuals who are keen to sign up for courses but could not afford the fees, despite government subsidies.

Two participants, who were former madrasah students and are now employed in the religious sector, expressed hope that MMOs organise more programmes to help madrasah students develop skills essential for their employment. Even better, organisations can provide opportunities to network and interact with non-madrasah students, regardless of religious affiliation. Such sessions can be initiated via internships and community engagement. In this way, it is hoped that madrasah students will expand their network and at the same time deepen their understanding of non-madrasah students who could well be their colleagues or employers in the future.



Conclusion

Many respondents shared common key employment concerns: Battle with mismatched jobs; low salary, poor working conditions and the lack of benefits; unfavourable treatments and relations with management, colleagues and clients; challenges in getting and/or sustaining a job; negative perception of Malay/Muslim youths in the workplace; and lack of community support.

Throughout this study, participants' comments reflected the full spectrum of negative and positive outlooks. Although some respondents expressed little optimism as regards their state of employment and their perception of the Malay/Muslim youth situation in the workplace, several seemed to have positive outlooks for the future.

Youths are assets to a nation. Youth as a transitory stage in life, not only presents a range of possibilities but also poses the risk of being mired in adverse socioeconomic outcomes, such as being trapped in low-paying jobs (Tai and Toh, 2017). When transitioning from dependence to independence, youth can be fraught with difficulties, thus calling for broader moral, social and economic support.

The following are measures to be considered:

Tailored Support for Vulnerable Youths

It is important to recognise that all young people will experience a variety of employment issues at some point in their lives, which will lead to different future outcomes. Not everyone will enjoy the same opportunities to develop their academic ability and personal skills, or rise through the ranks to secure a more senior position with commensurate remuneration.

From our study, while younger workers may face disadvantages in the labour market, some young people are more vulnerable to poor employment prospects. This includes at-risk cohorts, such as youths with lower academic qualifications, as their career is more likely to experience stagnancy or even a downward trajectory.

The prospects of young fresh graduates entering the labour market appear to be grim. Current trends suggest that fewer fresh graduates find employment within six months (Wong, 2018). Job expectations are subsequently lowered as more jobs are offered on a short-term contract basis (Elangovan, 2019). The problem is compounded during periods of slower economic growth.

Youths are also settling for alternative work such as freelancing (Nur Asyiqin, 2015). Depending on the type of freelance work, there may be long-term impact on their career trajectory. For fresh school-leavers, doing freelance work can lower down their skills hierarchy. Take food delivery for example – youths lose their crucial first years post-graduation, which would have placed them well on their career pathway. This will have an adverse impact on their longer-term employability.

With little financial security, young workers cannot wait out a downturn and might resort to taking whatever job that is available, even if it pays less than what their skills demand (International Labour Office, 2011). This loss of human capital poses a serious drain on labour potential, resulting in lower earnings and lower output (Edwards and Hertel-Fernandez, 2010). The consequences are lower productivity and the displacement of less educated workers.

Hence, support for at-risk youths, given the likely challenges they will face in the job market, is critical to improve their chances of employment. Ideally, support should begin even while our youths are in school. Such pre-emptive intervention is more effective than reactionary measures when they vie for employment opportunities.

The key is also to engage vulnerable youths in addressing their anxieties over under-employment and long-term unemployment. Such issues, if not addressed, can do serious damage to prospects. The outcome will be costly to society as a whole. Hence, preventative measures, and pro-active, intensive interventions are necessary to address the anxieties faced by our youths.

One approach to engage vulnerable youths is through fostering trust and building relationships with them. In this aspect, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) representatives can provide advice and knowledge on best practices and methods. According to our study, youths, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, prefer open, voluntary participation and an indiscriminate approach to dealing with issues.

Adopting a holistic approach is another way of looking at support structures. This means developing personalised pathways; improving access to services especially counselling; mentorship; and post-placement follow-ups. Intervention is needed to ensure that young people remain motivated to work or to improve their employability.

It is important for policy-makers and practitioners to not only help with access to jobs, but also to promote job quality and career progression.

Enhancing Youth's Capability to Take Advantage of Job Opportunities

Strengthening a youth's ability to take advantage of job opportunities starts with ensuring they are equipped with the relevant skills for emerging industries. Most of the youth we interviewed started work early in their lives and hence lost out on the opportunity to be adequately trained. Not a few expressed a lack of job mobility and flexibility to take on a wider variety of functions. Empowering them to do so requires enhancing access to network and information.

Creating a Youth Employment Network and Support Programmes

As youths prepare to make the transition from school to the workplace, they are faced with options, the variety of which is dependent on prevailing job market conditions. In the absence of information and guidance on how such options impact their long-term employability, decisions undertaken may have negative impact on their career trajectory. Youths turn to less ideal options that are immediately available to them. These include but are not limited to lower quality jobs and/or risky behaviours.

Many of the youths we interviewed are not aware their education will not guarantee them a job commensurate with their qualifications. They do not realise how consistent skills training is beneficial.

We also recognise that youths with lower academic qualifications are generally unaware of what sort of skills prospective employers look for and which industry offers greater potential for growth.

Students need to start developing skills that employers want and build capacities that will directly help them in their search for particular jobs. High-quality technical skills training should be made more widely available to counter the mismatch of skills and jobs evident in the experiences of those we interviewed.

Greater dissemination and circulation of useful information is essential in helping youth overcome the challenge of gaining access. In particular, existing channels of information gathering such as *Facebook*

and *Instagram* could be better understood and more effectively employed for the purposes of employment.

Based on our study, our youth respondents lack support systems that can help them prepare for the recruitment and hiring process that are necessary for employment. Particularly in a market where personal connections are important, creating opportunities for mentorship and networking outside of family relations can go far in overcoming the barriers of 'who you know' (OECD, 2013). Mentorship as a strategy can also help in pointing youth in the right direction where resources can be found; and also helping young people to better engage with the changing job market (OECD, 2013).

To improve employment prospects of young people, community leaders can also devise multi-stakeholder initiatives or policy platforms to address youth concerns. These platforms are starting blocks for effective outreach, and to collect intelligence for developing better programmes.

It is also effective to involve youths in the design and development of these programmes. Their participation ensures that programmes meet their needs and the limitations of young workers in the market. Such initiative ensures youth participation in policy discussions, programme development, and agenda setting. Collaboration — or even the co-creation of policies and programmes with youth — will necessarily include diverse experiences and perspectives of young adults.

For MMOs that are keen to provide employment assistance and advice to youths, the findings of this research will help them understand the systemic bottlenecks faced by economically vulnerable youths in, first, their job search, and second, in applying for jobs. The results indicate a need to simplify procedures by providing hands-on guidance to prospective clients and to invest in staff training, both from a technical and soft skills perspective. In ensuring access to support, wider awareness and outreach remain essential. This can be achieved through:

- (i) door-to-door campaigns to generate awareness and provide information on employment assistance schemes;

- (ii) information on the types of support available and guide as to how to apply;
- (iii) accompanying first-time applicants to government-funded agencies such as the WSG;
- (iv) targeted support for youths encountering multiple issues. This support includes personal financial planning skills training, so that they learn about budgeting and saving habits; and
- (v) follow-up feedback on how youths are coping at their new job or the new course in which they enrolled; and whether additional help and coaching are needed.

The Pursuit of Decent Work in Changing Times

Youths in Singapore are becoming more educated, have greater expectation for job mobility and better career prospects. Without a reliable social security net, considering the rise of informal employment regardless of whether one is working in informal arrangements with their employers or irregularly self-employed (Zimmermann, 2012), many young people rely on their education as a ticket out of economic uncertainty. According to our youth respondents, as they transition from school to the workplace, most find the journey littered with hurdles, including a mismatch between skills and job requirements, intense job competition, lack of connections, or dilemmas of work-life balance.

The youth bulge in the population structure of the Malay community (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2017d) constitutes potential. It is imperative that the strengths of youth are harnessed. If disregarded, the problem can escalate into social instability. If a large cohort of young people is unable to find employment or earn a living wage, the youth bulge will become a demographic bomb to the country.

The large youth population, however, can be a demographic dividend if economic structures, state policies and institutions ensure that young people are put to work as productive citizens. Youths can be a positive force for development given the requisite knowledge and opportunity to succeed.

It remains crucial that stakeholders factor this youth bulge into their community and social development planning. The conventional approach in dealing with the youth bulge is to make young people job-ready. The better strategy, however, is that young people's skills – or more broadly, human capital – need to be enhanced to ensure productivity in the labour market. Among other things, this can be accomplished by ensuring that our youth remain adequately equipped to take advantage of job opportunities by way of better access to network and information.

In general, a stable and growing economic and political environment, and a strong labour market are integral for job creation and employment. In some cases, this may not even be sufficient. Young workers are more likely to have jobs that offer limited job security, social protection and training opportunity (OECD, 2013). These areas remain necessary to redress.

Demographics, globalisation and rapid technological changes are fast transforming the labour market. As baby boomers leave the labour force and technology becomes more sophisticated, the challenges confronting skills development will intensify. The changing nature of work will create additional demands for youths who are already experiencing sub-optimal labour market outcomes (Craig and McKean, 2017). Precarious youth employment is on the rise, as jobs for young people grew increasingly contractual or temporary (Campbell and Price, 2016). Gig economy jobs are increasing, and will likely continue for some time. The challenges faced by youth will become increasingly pressing and more complicated, notwithstanding the obvious struggle arising from both low academic qualification and income.

Ensuring that our youth is equipped with the right skills to complete their schooling, access further education or training, or gain employment is critical to a successful school-to-work transition. For all young people to successfully navigate this process and meet the inevitable challenges they face as they mature is critical. Young people need to nurture their aspirations. Coupled with foundational employability skills and career exposure, this will place all young people in a healthy position for a productive future.

In preparing the workforce for the future, it is important that young workers get a good start in their careers, with suitable workplace conditions; and the recognition of the inter-relational dynamics between their education; age; culture; and the nature of the job market.

Despite the best of intentions and measures, there are ways a young person can still fall through the cracks. The community needs to have dialogues and conversations with youths. This means pointing them in the right direction as much as showing them the options, where available. Much remains to be done to support a young person in both personal and capability development for the job market. Efforts in this area should continue towards ensuring that our youth maximise their economic potential.

Scope for Further Research

There is no easy way to overcome employment challenges among youths. Refining MMOs' programmes and initiatives may well be necessary to induce a positive outlook among the Malay/Muslim youths and their perspective on the changing nature of work.

In summary, this survey has produced a number of evidence-based insights into youth perception and experience that can be used as first steps in addressing some of the problems reported. The sample size for this study is small, but the results reveal interesting trends among youth in the Malay/Muslim community. This report argues for the need for further study and intervention where employability of youths is concerned.

The findings of this study serve as the genesis for a deeper understanding of the perception of Malay/Muslim youths. Subsequent exploration of the topic or related field is necessary to examine the matter further and draw fresh conclusions.

By themselves, surveys do little to change support structures in society or the experiences of the young. Factors not limited to the views of stakeholders, such as employers, and the effectiveness of current youth support programmes need to be further examined. Concerns about the future of youth employment

within the Malay/Muslim community remain. As such, this study should facilitate further conversations and discussion.

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