

Career Exploration and Job Readiness Levels of College Students in the Demographic Bonus Era

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Abstract

The demographic bonus era demands that universities not only produce knowledgeable graduates but also have mature and competitive career readiness. This study aims to describe the level of career exploration and work readiness of Ma'soem University students as part of an effort to understand the readiness of young human resources to face the modern world of work. This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach with a population of 460 final-year students at Ma'soem University, and 224 respondents were selected using the Slovin formula with a proportional random sampling technique. Data were collected through a Likert scale questionnaire that has been tested for validity and reliability, and analyzed using descriptive statistics through the calculation of averages, percentages, and achievement categories. The results show that the level of career exploration of students is in the moderate category with an average score of 92.09 (73.67%), while work readiness is also in the moderate category with an average of 87.28 (69.82%). These findings indicate that students have fairly good career awareness, but still need to be strengthened in practical skills, adaptability, and professional confidence. This study recommends the need for integration between academic learning and career-based experiences through internship programs, career guidance, and industry partnerships to improve students' work readiness in the era of digital transformation and global competition.

Keywords: Demographic bonus; Career exploration; Job readiness; Career center

1. INTRODUCTION

Changes in the global economic structure and the acceleration of digital transformation require college graduates to be more career-ready and adapt to the dynamics of the labor market. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency, the open unemployment rate in Indonesia in February 2025 was recorded at 4.76 percent, with the largest contributor coming from young college graduates aged 15-24 (BPS, 2025). Furthermore, the results of a Tracer Study with BPS indicate that more than 60 percent of graduates in 2023 will be working in jobs unrelated to their fields of study. In fact, former Minister of Education and Culture Nadiem Makarim once revealed that around 80 percent of students pursue careers outside their majors. (Besyandi Mufti, 2025). The OECD report emphasizes that the labor market remains fragile and the informal sector remains high. The unemployment rate has fallen from 7.1% in mid-2020 at the peak of the pandemic to 4.9% in mid-2024, below the pre-pandemic range of 5-5.5% (OECD, 2024). This phenomenon demonstrates the importance of early career exploration so that students can understand their potential, values, and professional direction that aligns with industry needs. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) also emphasized that weak career orientation is a factor hindering graduates' transition to a sustainable workforce (Antoninis et al., 2023). By taking advantage of the demographic bonus momentum, universities need to optimize the role of career centers in strengthening career exploration and student work readiness so that they can compete globally and be productive at a young age.

Career exploration and job readiness are two crucial aspects that determine a student's success in transitioning from education to work. Career exploration helps individuals understand their interests, values, and potential, enabling them to determine an appropriate professional path (Hackett, 2006; Savickas, 2005; Thahir et al., 2021). This process not only creates clarity of career goals, but also enhances intrinsic motivation and long-term career planning (Suprpto & Puspitadewi, 2025; Wehmeyer et al., 2018). Meanwhile, work readiness reflects students' ability to integrate academic, social, and technical skills relevant to job market needs (Fugate et al., 2004; Hlad'o et al., 2019). High levels of work readiness are associated with self-confidence, flexibility to change, and the ability to make career decisions independently (Chen et al., 2020; Kirdok & Bölükbaşı, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2016). In the context of higher education in Indonesia, these two variables are strategic indicators of the success of higher education institutions in preparing students to face global competition (Fernandes & Singh, 2022; Haryati et al., 2025; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). Previous research also shows that career exploration and job readiness are important aspects that can be influenced through increased self-efficacy, internship experience, and access to information about the industrial world (Diana et al., 2025; Syukur, 2025). Thus, understanding the level of career exploration and work readiness is important to strengthen the design of student career development policies in the demographic bonus era.

Research over the past decade has shown that strengthening students' career exploration and work readiness correlates with a variety of transition-to-work outcomes, from career clarity and participation in employability-building activities to post-graduation employment opportunities but the empirical evidence remains fragmented across contexts and intervening variables (e.g., internships, digital literacy, resilience, and social engagement) (Ahmid et al., 2023; Diana et al., 2025; García-Sánchez et al., n.d.; Healy, 2023; Jackson et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022). In general, curriculum and pedagogical studies indicate that integrating career learning into the curriculum encourages more reflective and directed career exploration (Healy, 2023). Meanwhile, student participation in various employability development activities (career clinics, industrial projects, professional communities) is positively related to work readiness indicators (Jackson et al., 2024). In the psychosocial realm, career adaptability and social adaptability have been shown to mediate the exploration-readiness link through increasing resources for facing career tasks and transitions (Li et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2020) and supported by other research results that emphasize the value of placement/internship experience (Gohae, 2020; Xia et al., 2020).

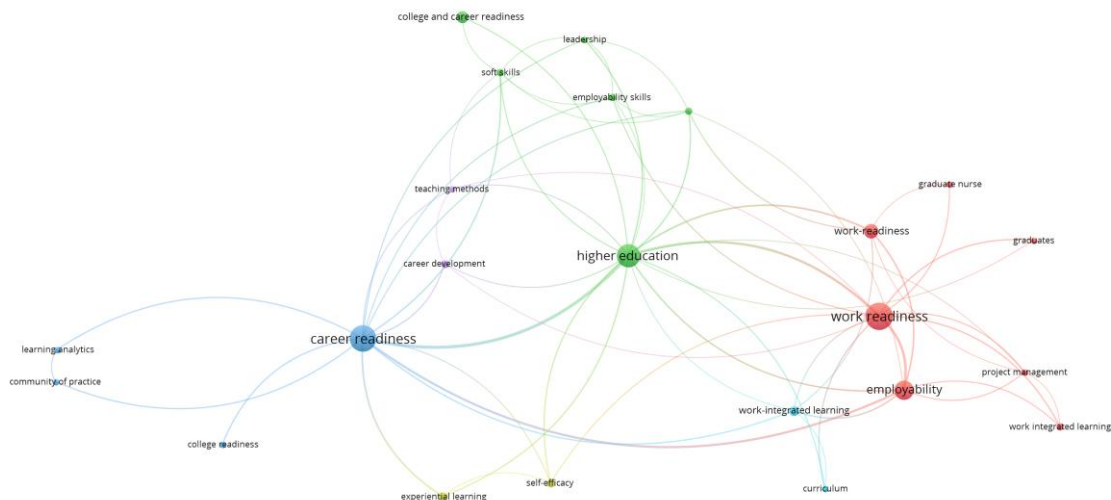


Figure 1. Gap Research Berdasarkan Database Scopus

Based on network visualization analysis using VOSviewer software, a conceptual framework can be developed for research on career exploration and the level of work readiness of university students in the demographic dividend era. The conceptual framework positions career readiness and work readiness as two

distinct but interrelated constructs. Career readiness encompasses dimensions such as self-awareness, career exploration, career planning, and career decision-making. Work readiness encompasses dimensions such as field-specific technical competencies, soft skills, and readiness for transition to the workforce. Universities act as mediators, facilitating the development of both types of readiness through various pedagogical strategies, including work-integrated learning and experiential learning (Khampirat, 2021; Ragunathan, 2023). In the context of the demographic dividend, the conceptual framework needs to incorporate specific contextual variables, such as generational characteristics (e.g., digital natives, entrepreneurial mindset, expectations regarding work-life balance), labor market conditions (level of competition, competency demands, job opportunities), and higher education policies. Self-efficacy is positioned as a mediating variable that links learning experiences with career exploration and work readiness (Bandura, 2017; Makki et al., 2023).

Bibliometric network visualization reveals that student work readiness is a multidimensional construct that involves the integration of career readiness, work readiness, and the central role of higher education institutions in facilitating competency development. Soft skills serve as transversal competencies that bridge academic and professional orientations, while work-integrated learning and experiential learning serve as pedagogical strategies for developing practical readiness. Self-efficacy emerges as a psychological factor influencing students' career exploration behavior and confidence in their abilities in the job market (Juniarti & Andriani, 2023; Thahir et al., 2025). In the context of Indonesia's demographic dividend era, the findings from this visualization analysis underscore the urgency of developing a holistic approach to preparing students to face the challenges of an increasingly competitive job market. Research on career exploration and the level of work readiness of university students in the demographic dividend era is strategically positioned to fill the literature gap by integrating developmental (career readiness) and practical (work readiness) perspectives, while also considering the unique characteristics of the demographic dividend generation and Indonesia's socio-economic context. The conceptual framework developed from this analysis can serve as a foundation for more in-depth empirical investigations into the dynamics of student work readiness in facing the opportunities and challenges of the demographic dividend.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to integrate the concepts of career exploration and student work readiness within a comprehensive analytical framework to understand students' transition to the workforce in the demographic dividend era, by broadening the perspective to the policy and management dimensions of higher education. Unlike previous research, which is generally descriptive in nature or focuses on the direct relationship between individual psychological variables, this study links these two constructs to the institutional context, particularly the role of university career centers as strategic instruments for human resource development policies. This approach provides added value because it highlights how student career exploration strategies can be translated into institutional policies to strengthen work readiness, career literacy, and connectivity with the industrial world. Theoretically, this research enriches the study of educational management policy analysis by offering a model for strengthening career readiness based on career exploration that can be used as a basis for formulating independent campus policies, tracer study programs, and digital career guidance systems. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to not only provide an empirical contribution to the student career literature but also provide a conceptual and practical foundation for higher education policymakers in formulating sustainable and adaptive career development directions to changes in the national and global workforce structure. Therefore, this study aims to describe the level of career exploration and work readiness of university students in facing the challenges of the workforce in the demographic dividend era. The main focus of this study is to answer the question of how are career exploration and work readiness among university students at Ma'soem University?

2. METHODS

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach that aims to objectively describe the level of career exploration and work readiness of college students in the demographic bonus era at Ma'soem University. This descriptive approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the research objective, namely to examine the phenomenon to capture students' perceptions and experiences regarding their career development process from the aspects of career exploration and work readiness. Career exploration referred to in this study is the active process of students in recognizing their potential, seeking information on the world of work, and building an understanding of career alternatives to support mature career decision-making (Savickas, 2005). Meanwhile, the work readiness referred to in this research is the level of students' ability to adapt, apply technical and non-technical skills, and display professional behavior that is in accordance with the demands of the world of work (Fugate et al., 2004; Jackson, 2014).

The research was conducted at Ma'soem University, a private university in West Java that offers a variety of study programs at both diploma and undergraduate levels. The study population consisted of 460 final-year students from all study programs. The sampling technique used the Slovin formula with a 5% error rate, resulting in a sample size of 224 respondents. The sample selection process was carried out using proportional random sampling, so that each study program received representation according to the number of students. The research instrument was a Likert-scale questionnaire developed based on career exploration theory (Hijri & Akmal, 2017; Savickas, 2005) and work readiness theory (Fugate et al., 2004) which has been adapted to the context of Indonesian students. Each statement item uses five answer options, from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". Before being distributed, the questionnaire was piloted on 30 respondents to determine its level of validity and reliability. The results of the validity test stated that all instruments, both the career exploration and work readiness instruments, were valid and tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha with results ≥ 0.70 , indicating that the questionnaire was reliable. The data collection procedure was carried out through the distribution of online questionnaires using Google Forms sent to final-year students. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were given a brief explanation of the purpose of the study, guaranteed confidentiality of answers, and the time required to complete the questionnaire. The collected data was verified to ensure there were no duplications or incomplete responses before further processing.

The data were processed using SPSS version 24 software. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, including calculating the average (mean), percentage, and frequency distribution for each indicator of career exploration and work readiness variables. The results of the analysis are presented in tables and graphs to clarify interpretation. This approach is expected to provide a factual picture of the extent to which Ma'soem University students have explored their careers and prepared themselves for the world of work, as well as serve as a basis for career center managers to design more targeted policy interventions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Result

Based on data processing results from 224 final-year student respondents at Ma'soem University, a general overview of students' levels of career exploration and work readiness was obtained. Overall, both variables showed relatively moderate scores, indicating that students have sufficient awareness and preparedness for the world of work, but not yet optimal.

Career Exploration

The results of the descriptive analysis indicate that based on data collected from 224 respondents on the career exploration variable of Ma'soem University students, the mean was 92.09, the median was 96.00, and the mode was 100. The detailed results of the descriptive analysis can be seen in the following table::

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Student Career Exploration

Career Exploration	
N	224
Mean	92.09
Median	96
Mode	100
Std. Deviation	11.187
Variance	125.14
Minimum	66
Maximum	118
Sum	20628

Source: Research Data Processing, 2025

From the results of these descriptive statistics, the following levels of achievement can be created:

Table 2. Percentage of Career Exploration Achievements

	Number of Items	Maximum Score	Average Achievement Score	Percentage Achievement	Category
Career Exploration	25	125	92.09	73.672	Currently

Source: Research Data Processing, 2025

Based on the descriptive analysis of the Career Exploration variable, the average achievement score was 92.09 out of a maximum score of 125, or equivalent to 73.67%. This result indicates that the career exploration level of Ma'soem University students is in the moderate category. This means that most students have a fairly good awareness of the importance of recognizing their potential, understanding career interests, and seeking information about the world of work, but are not yet fully consistent in planning concrete steps towards their desired career. Based on the descriptive achievement score level, it is then used as a standard to create a score categorization consisting of 5 categories: very high, high, medium, low, and very low.

Table 3. Results of Career Exploration Categorization and Achievements

Category	Range of Values Based on Standard Deviation	Career Exploration Achievement Results
Very high	$X > 109$	4
Tall	$98 < X \leq 109$	79
Currently	$87 < X \leq 98$	71
Low	$75 \leq X \leq 87$	42
Very Low	$X < 75$	28

Source: Research Data Processing, 2025

Based on the results of descriptive analysis referring to the range of values based on standard deviation, it was found that of the 224 students of Ma'soem University, the majority were in the high and medium categories. A total of 79 students (35.3%) fell into the high category with a score range of $98 < X \leq 109$, indicating that this group had good awareness and activeness in exploring their potential, seeking career information, and building long-term plans for the future. Students in this category were generally able to identify their personal interests and values and take concrete steps such as participating in training, internships, or career guidance on campus. Then, there were 71 students (31.7%) who were in the medium category with a score range of $87 < X \leq 98$. This group describes students who have understood the importance of career exploration but have not been fully active or consistent in implementing it. They tend to still be at the orientation stage and seeking basic information about the world of work without being followed by concrete actions to develop professional skills.

Furthermore, 42 students (18.8%) fell into the low category, with scores ranging from $75 \leq X \leq 87$, while 28 students (12.5%) fell into the very low category ($X < 75$). These two categories indicate that some students still have limited career exploration, either due to a lack of self-confidence, limited access to career information, or low motivation to participate in career development activities. This situation indicates the need for an active role from the Ma'soem University Career Center in providing more intensive career counseling services and professional orientation training. Only 4 students (1.8%) fell into the very high category ($X > 109$). This small group represents students who already have a clear career direction, are actively seeking professional experience, and have been able to design a measurable career strategy.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that the majority of students fell into the medium to high category, totaling 150 students, or 67% of all respondents. This indicates that the career exploration of Ma'soem University students is generally quite good, but there is still a need to increase the proportion of students achieving high and very high levels through career literacy strengthening programs, career fair activities, and industry internship collaborations. A summary of these achievement levels can be seen in the following figure:

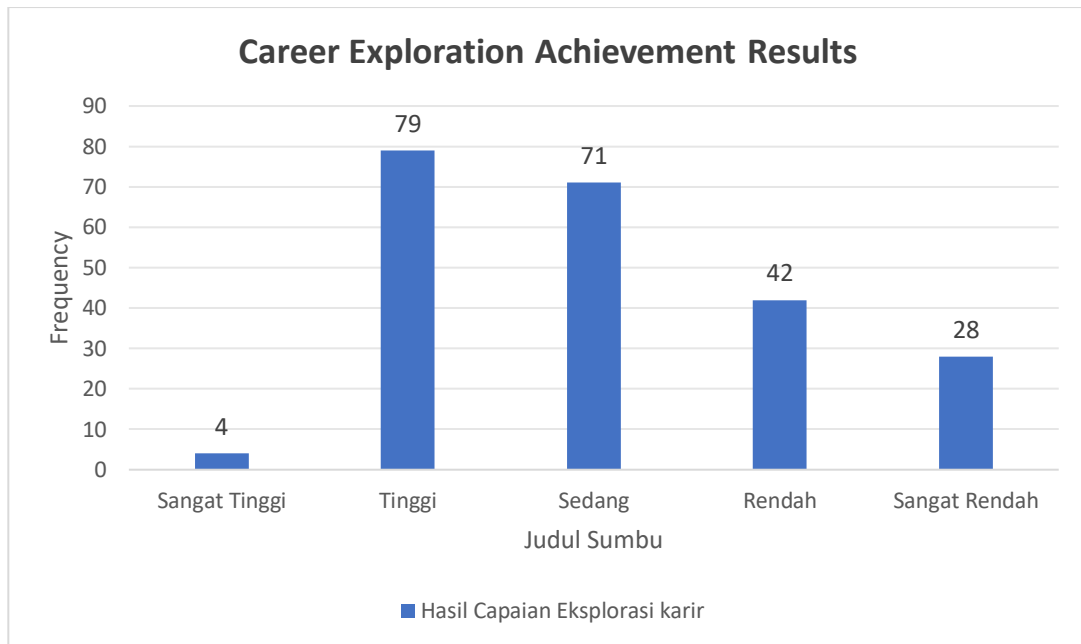


Figure 2. Career Exploration Categorization Diagram

Source: Author, 2025

Job Readiness

The results of the descriptive analysis conducted on 224 research respondents revealed that the job readiness variable for Ma'soem University students showed a mean of 87.28, a median of 88.00, and a mode of 88. The detailed results of this descriptive analysis can be seen in the following table:

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Student Work Readiness

Job Readiness	
N	87.28
Mean	88
Median	88
Mode	7.922
Std. Deviation	62.757
Variance	69
Minimum	111
Maximum	19550
Sum	87.28

Source: Research Data Processing, 2025

From the results of descriptive statistics, the following levels of achievement can be made:

Table 5. Percentage of Work Readiness Achievement

	Number of Items	Maximum Score	Average Achievement Score	Percentage Achievement	Category
Work Readiness	25	125	87.28	69.824	Currently

Source: Research Data Processing, 2025

Based on the results of the descriptive analysis of the student work readiness variable, an average achievement score of 87.28 was obtained out of a maximum score of 125, or equivalent to 69.82%, which is classified as moderate. This finding indicates that Ma'soem University students generally have a fairly good level of work readiness, although not yet reaching the optimal category. This value indicates that most students have begun

to have an adequate understanding of the world of work, professional responsibilities, and the importance of interpersonal and technical skills to support their careers. Based on the descriptive level of achievement scores above, it is then used as a standard to create a score categorization consisting of 5 categories: very high, high, moderate, low, very low.

Table 6. Categorization Results and Work Readiness Achievements

Category	Value Range (rounded)	Work Readiness Outcomes
Very high	$X > 99$	17
Tall	$91 < X \leq 99$	40
Currently	$83 < X \leq 91$	104
Low	$75 \leq X \leq 83$	47
Very Low	$X < 75$	16

Source: Research Data Processing, 2025

Based on the categorization of the work readiness levels of Ma'soem University students, out of a total of 224 respondents, the majority of students were in the moderate category, namely 104 students, or approximately 46.4%. This result indicates that nearly half of the students have a fairly good level of work readiness, but are not yet fully mature in facing the demands of the modern workplace. Students in this category generally already have an understanding of the importance of work ethic, responsibility, and basic skills such as communication and teamwork, but still need to strengthen technical skills and self-confidence in real work situations. Furthermore, there are 40 students (17.9%) who are included in the high category, and 17 students (7.6%) in the very high category. These two groups indicate students who have optimal work readiness, both in terms of skill mastery, clarity of career goals, and readiness to face the job selection process. They tend to actively participate in self-development activities such as internships, professional training, career seminars, or soft skills programs organized by the university. Students in this category also generally demonstrate a positive attitude towards change, good adaptability, and a drive for lifelong learning.

However, there were still 47 students (21%) in the low category, and 16 students (7.1%) in the very low category. This indicates that some students still face obstacles in preparing themselves to enter the workforce, either due to limited practical experience, lack of training, or low self-confidence. This condition demonstrates the importance of support from the campus, particularly the Ma'soem University Career Center, to expand student access to career development programs, job interview simulations, and 21st-century skills training. In summary, the level of achievement can be seen in the following figure:

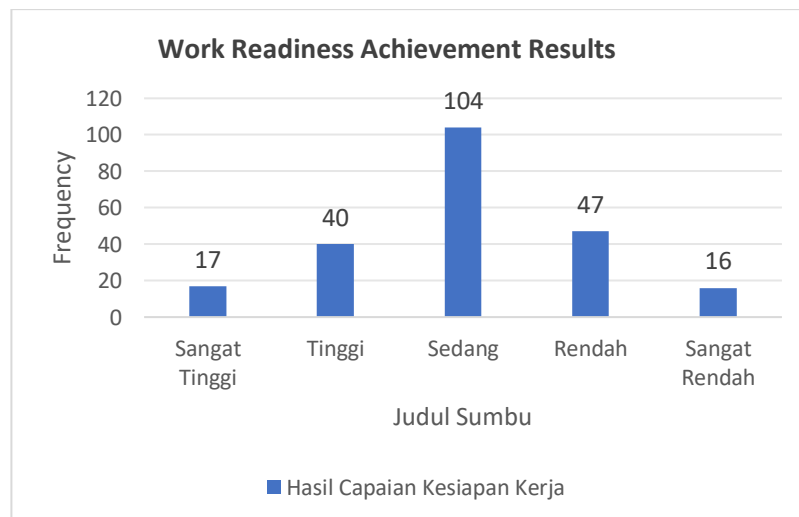


Figure 3. Job Readiness Categorization Diagram

Source: Author, 2025

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the career exploration level of Ma'soem University students is in the moderate category with an average score of 92.09 (73.67%), while their work readiness is also in the moderate category with an average score of 87.28 (69.82%). These findings indicate that students are already aware of the importance of career planning, but still face challenges in converting this awareness into real readiness to enter the world of work. In general, these results reinforce the view that career exploration is a continuous development process that allows individuals to understand themselves and their environment before making rational career decisions (Savickas, 2005; Shobrina, 2024). Ma'soem University students have demonstrated their involvement in this exploratory process, for example through internships, academic mentoring, or participation in career seminars. However, some students are still in the direction-finding stage and lack a measurable career strategy. This condition aligns with research findings that found that many students have high exploratory motivation, but lack systematic planning due to a lack of direct experience in the workplace (Alifah, 2025; Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020).

Meanwhile, the moderate level of job readiness indicates that students possess basic skills such as communication, responsibility, and teamwork, but still require strengthening of adaptive and professional skills. These results are consistent with findings that confirm that although students demonstrate a theoretical understanding of employability, there remains a gap between academic competency and the practical readiness required by industry (Jackson, 2014). This finding is also in line with the results of studies which show that students' work readiness is greatly influenced by the level of career exploration and career adaptability, namely the ability to adapt to the dynamics of the job market (Harsantik et al., 2025; Ichwan et al., 2025). Low research results can be influenced by various factors such as initiative, motivation, critical thinking, risk-taking, and organizational skills. As explained by Caballero & Walker (2010) work readiness is determined by personal characteristics, organizational intelligence, work competencies, and social intelligence (Thahir et al., 2026).

The phenomenon of moderate achievement in both variables can also be explained through career readiness theory (Fugate et al., 2004) which emphasizes that work readiness is the result of the integration of competence, self-confidence, and a desire for lifelong learning. Therefore, students who actively engage in career exploration have the potential to develop higher levels of work readiness, provided they receive adequate environmental support, such as industry-based training and ongoing career guidance. Institutionally, the results of this study provide important insights for the Ma'soem University Career Center to strengthen its facilitative function in helping students design more applicable career strategies. Career development programs can be directed at bridging the gap between exploration and work readiness through activities such as career coaching, job interview simulations, digital portfolio creation, and collaboration with industry partners. These efforts are expected to increase the effectiveness of career exploration into real work readiness, in accordance with the concept of work-integrated learning (Dalrymple et al., 2021) and strengthened by (Healy, 2023; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020; Suparyati & Habsya, 2024) as an approach that is able to connect academic learning with the needs of the global job market.

Thus, it can be concluded that Ma'soem University students are in a transitional stage toward mature career readiness. They have developed a good exploratory awareness, but still need to strengthen adaptive skills and real-world work experience. The implications of this research are not only relevant to student career development but also contribute to strengthening higher education management policies in the context of Indonesia's demographic dividend, where improving graduate quality is a strategic factor for the competitiveness of the national workforce.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the career exploration and work readiness levels of Ma'soem University students are generally moderate. This reflects students' awareness of the importance of planning their future careers, but they still face challenges in translating this awareness into actual work readiness. Students' career exploration is oriented toward self-awareness and career information seeking, but has not been accompanied by consistent, planned activities such as internship participation, career coaching, or professional portfolio development. This situation suggests that students' career exploration has only reached the conceptual stage and has not yet fully reached the practical stage that can enhance career readiness.

Students' work readiness, which is also moderate, indicates strong potential, but it has not yet been optimally realized. Students possess basic communication, responsibility, and collaboration skills, but still lack

adaptive skills, problem-solving, and professional confidence. Scientifically, this demonstrates a gap between career awareness and career employability, reinforcing the view that work readiness is an integrated result of ability, motivation, self-efficacy, and contextual support from the educational and social environment. These findings have strategic significance in the context of Indonesia's demographic dividend, as they demonstrate that improving the quality of students' career exploration can directly impact the work readiness of the younger generation. When the career exploration process is integrated with work-integrated learning programs, students will be better prepared to face changes in the employment structure and the demands of the global job market. Therefore, the results of this study emphasize the importance of developing campus policies that support strengthening career literacy and empowering students to become superior, competitive human resources. Overall, the results of this study not only provide an empirical contribution to the literature on student career development but also offer a policy basis for improving the quality of university graduates. By strengthening career exploration and work readiness through adaptive, evidence-based education policies, universities can play a strategic role in ensuring that Indonesia's young generation is truly prepared to become a productive workforce in the era of the demographic dividend and global digital transformation.

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