

# Intersectional factors in youth transition: Stories of vocational high schools’ graduates in Indonesia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v8i1.28847>

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Keywords:</i></p> <p>vocational high school</p> <p>school-to-work transition</p> <p>Indonesia</p> <p>youth</p> <p>employment</p>	<p>This study examines the challenges faced by vocational high school graduates in their transition to employment and their strategies for overcoming these challenges. Vocational high school is advocated as a provider of skilled and job-ready graduates to solve unemployment problems. However, employment statistics show that vocational high school graduates account for the largest share of unemployment in Indonesia. This study aims to improve our understanding of this anomaly. The data in this paper were collected through in-depth interviews with vocational high school graduates in Yogyakarta, with a balanced representation of gender, geographic location, and specialization. We found that most graduates successfully obtained employment immediately after graduation. However, most of the employment is of low quality, indicating vulnerability in the transition. Their challenges emerge at different stages: before, during and after their schooling. This study also highlights the institutional role of vocational high schools in facilitating the school-to-work transition. Thus, this study contributes to the current discourse on youth transition by highlighting the intersectionality of factors influencing the transition of vocational high school graduates to the labor market and by pointing to the central role of the school in supporting their transition process.</p>

**Citation suggestion:**  
Ramadhani, I. S., Isbah, M. F., & Azca, M. N. (2025). Intersectional factors in youth transition: Stories of vocational high schools’ graduates in Indonesia. *Simulacra*, 8(1), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v8i1.28847>

Received 14 January 2025; Received in revised form 6 March 2025; Accepted 14 March 2025; Published online 25 June 2025.

## Introduction

Indonesia's youth unemployment rate is typically higher than the other age cohorts. The statistics in 2023 show that the rate was 19.40 per cent, amounting to 4.3 million people (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023a). Such unemployment among young people needs to be addressed separately from that of adults due to its distinctive transitional phase (Kabbani & Kothari, 2005). Among the different dimensions of youth transition, attaining financial autonomy is one of the common projections of a young individual's successful trajectory into adulthood (Naafs & White, 2012). However, many barriers stand in the way of young people securing a place in the labor market. Such barriers are often attributed to a lack of skills and experience (ILO, 2011), which is often exacerbated by unforeseen global phenomena, such as economic crises or pandemics (ILO, 2022a) and the constantly shifting economic structure (ILO, 2022a). Changes in the economic structure will affect the supply and demand of skills in the labor market (ILO, 2013, p. 23), forcing young people to adapt to the dynamics. However, low-quality education and the gap between the academic curriculum and the changing demands of the labor market often do not equip young people with the agility to adapt (Schucher, 2017).

In this case, vocational education is considered an effective solution to the youth unemployment problem (DeLuca et al., 2015; Tang & Shi, 2017). Although the implementation of vocational education varies across countries (Renold et al., 2018), the commonality is the practicum component in the vocational education curriculum, which aims to equip students with the capacity and ability needed in the actual work environment (ILO, 2013). However, it remains difficult for vocational high school

graduates in Indonesia to secure a job in the labor market.

Globally, studies have been conducted to identify factors contributing to unemployment for vocational education graduates. The various factors are centered around the lack of collaboration between the vocational education system and existing industries, resulting in a mismatch between the skills output and labor market demand (Ali et al., 2020; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002; Talento et al., 2022). In addition to the structural challenges, there is still a prevalent societal prejudice that vocational high school is seen as an educational path for those from low-income households. The vocational high school students are often portrayed as individuals who may not have the means to pursue higher education and are limited to low-paying jobs (Kesik & Şahin, 2020). Therefore, vocational high schools are perceived as perpetuating the social hierarchy of these individuals (Kesik & Şahin, 2020; Ling, 2015).

Recognizing that these critical issues are also prevalent in Indonesia, the government issued Presidential Instruction No. 9/2016 on Revitalizing Vocational High Schools. The revitalization strategy aims to improve the quality and branding of vocational high school graduates to compete in the evolving labor market by securing stable employment or becoming an entrepreneur (Direktorat Pembinaan Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan, 2017). The policy was then expanded through Presidential Regulation No. 68/2022 on the Revitalization of Vocational Education and Vocational Training (VEVT) and other supporting regulations from related ministries (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Vokasi, 2023). Since the intensification of this revitalization program, the open unemployment rate of vocational high school graduates has declined gradually (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023b). Nevertheless, vocational high school graduates still

constitute the highest unemployment rate compared to graduates of other education levels (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023a).

According to the National Labor Force Survey in 2023, the vocational high school graduates in Yogyakarta's labor force reached approximately 541,992. Based on the total number of those working within this cohort, a significant majority of 95.51 per cent were successfully integrated in the labor market (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023a). These figures make Yogyakarta a province with high absorption rates of labor consisting of vocational high school graduates. Therefore, this research focuses on Yogyakarta's youth to capture the transition challenges in Indonesia and capture the viable approach to overcome them. Aside from successful stories, unsuccessful stories are also explored to acknowledge their existence amid successful transitions. Both narratives can inform policymakers to support the transition of vocational high school graduates in securing employment. Policy discussion can be centered around the quality and suitability of the existing vocational high school system and interventions to assist the transition.

Most studies on Indonesian youth transition and aspirations have focused on the influence of sociocultural and socioeconomic factors (Nilan et al., 2011; Parker & Nilan, 2013; Sziraczki & Reerink, 2004). Some scholars have also explored Indonesian youth transition from gendered subjectivity (e.g., Naafs, 2012, 2013; Sutopo et al., 2018) and class perspectives (e.g., Sutopo et al., 2018; Sutopo & Azca, 2013). Meanwhile, studies from the international context have indicated that vocational and technical education contributes to the outcomes of youth transition (Dumhs, 2019; Masdonati et al., 2010; Woods, 2008). However, only a few studies have focused specifically on the life experiences of vocational high school graduates during their transition to the

workforce in Indonesia. Therefore, this study fills the gap by exploring the experiences of vocational high school graduates' school-to-work transition, the obstacles faced amid successful transitions, and their coping strategies with the transition challenges.

## Method

This research employed a qualitative case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to explore the complex phenomenon of school-to-work transition among youth within the context of vocational high school graduates. The data were collected through in-depth interviews to get detailed descriptions of their personal experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at a mutually agreed upon location, chosen for the convenience of the informants (i.e., informants' houses or public spaces). The inquiries focused on their experiences in the school-to-work transition process and their perspectives on the role of the competencies obtained from their vocational education.

A total of 15 participants were located throughout five administrative regions of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. They belonged to a cohort of young people aged 15-24 who graduated from vocational high schools between 2017 and 2023. The participants were purposively selected by considering the representativeness of the vocational specializations and gender. They were also distributed according to the types of vocational high schools: public and private. The selection criteria were set to showcase a diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Interview sessions were recorded with the permission of the participants. The audio transcripts were coded to identify similarities in participants' experiences and grouped into themes. The coded information was used to interpret further the transition process experienced by vocational high school graduates. Before

the interview, the informants were assured of the confidentiality of their identities to optimize transparency in their responses. Accordingly, all participants' names quoted in this study are pseudonyms.

## Results and Discussion

This study found that most participants secured employment after completing their vocational high school education. Almost all expected to embark on employment immediately after graduation and had no intention of pursuing higher education. Those with prior plans to enroll in university also ended up working for several reasons, such as raising funds for tuition fees or failing to pass the university admission exam. Hence, regardless of the initial expectation of pursuing higher education, all participants sought immediate employment upon graduation.

In terms of employment outcomes, most participants succeeded in obtaining employment. However, securing employment is not the sole indicator of a successful school-to-work transition for young people. They also need stability and job satisfaction (ILO, 2015). The findings showed that most graduates faced persistent challenges due to a lack of secure and sustainable career paths. This study identified two primary attributes inherent in many participants' occupations that prevent them from securing long-term stability and influence their job satisfaction.

Firstly, most employment arrangements lack formal written contracts and merely depend on verbal agreements. Hence, these young workers do not have the legal basis to claim their employee rights, such as access to social security benefits on healthcare and occupational safety. Such benefits can be lifesaving during times of crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic (ILO,

2022b). Workers in this particular group are highly susceptible to experiencing sudden dismissal, so they would be impacted the hardest in the face of a global crisis. Secondly, some participants are dissatisfied with their current jobs due to irregular incomes and earning less often than the legally regulated regional minimum wage. This finding aligns with research by Newhouse and Suryadarma (2011) that public vocational high school graduates experienced a significant wage shortfall instead of securing better employment and labor force participation than those graduating from public general high schools in their early twenties. The findings indicate that the challenges young vocational high school graduates face continue beyond securing their first job but also in employment conduct. In fact, this study found that young vocational high school graduates faced various obstacles in their transition to the labor market in all three stages: before, during, and after their years of schooling in vocational high schools.

### *School-to-work transition challenges*

#### *Selecting vocational track and discipline*

The initial phase of transitioning from education to employment for youth involves identifying their skills, setting aspirations, and improving their employability (Laterite, 2019). For vocational high school graduates, the process begins before their enrolment when deciding to pursue a vocational track in senior high school and choosing their area of specialization. However, the findings showed that many of the graduates' knowledge of their chosen discipline and potential career opportunities was limited. The primary determinant impacting their decision was their financial circumstances and subpar academic performance rather than a passion or intentional pursuit.



### *Financial constraints*

Many informants indicated that their family's economic circumstances influenced their decision to enroll in a vocational high school instead of a general high school. The findings hinted at the prevailing stigma that vocational high school is an alternative education associated with socioeconomically underprivileged communities (OECD/Asian Development Bank, 2015). The predominant trajectory of general high school leavers is pursuing higher education prior to seeking employment. Since higher education requires substantial financing, it becomes unattainable for many individuals. Therefore, choosing the vocational track is considered a more viable solution to expedite their integration into the workforce.

A previous study by Olkun and Simsek (1999) reflected the same findings that financial limitations were the primary factor in selecting vocational high schools. However, they further highlighted that parents' influence plays a significant role in the decision. This finding contrasts the current study, showing that many graduates independently opted to enroll in vocational high school as they are aware of their families' financial situations. These circumstances highlight the prevailing stigma associated with vocational high schools and underscore how education is not accessible for all. Many young people enroll in vocational high schools not because they believe it will give them the privilege of acquiring more practical skills but because they are not privileged enough to pursue higher education.

### *Lack of prior academic performance*

Due to the prevailing stereotyping, many individuals perceive vocational high school as a lesser option than general high school (OECD/Asian Development Bank, 2015). Therefore, admission to general senior

high schools is often more competitive than the vocational high schools. Students with subpar academic performance usually fail in admission to general senior high schools. Hence, some participants interpreted their experience of enrolling in vocational high schools as an inevitable choice to avoid the discontinuation of their education.

*...the thing is, my grades were not very good. Furthermore, they already used the zoning system when I was about to enter senior high school. My house location was outside the available zone of registering for the SMA X. I could not register for SMA Y (as well), which is a (good) one around here. So, instead of getting thrown away to another school, I decided to enroll in a vocational high school (Riska, Yogyakarta, August 2023).*

Furthermore, many students encountered similar constraints when selecting their desired field of study. Specific disciplines are more popular, leading to tight competition in the enrolment. Hence, individuals with lower academic grades needed to sort their options based on the likelihood of acceptance rather than their skills and aspirations. Therefore, some participants may not have benefited from their vocational high school years because they were admitted to the 'wrong' program.

### *Learning experience*

Individuals' level of interest in their field of study sets the tone for their learning experiences and job search. When students possess a keen interest in their disciplines, it can optimize their engagement in learning (Ardi & Daharnis, 2017; Herpratiwi & Tohir, 2022, p. 431) and affect their employment trajectory (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010). The findings showed that only a few participants were admitted to a discipline aligned with their initial aspirations and aptitudes. Most enjoyed their schooling

experience and pursued careers in relevant fields.

On the other hand, the inability to select suitable vocational programs marks the hurdles of the school-to-work transition (Masdonati et al., 2010). Students extremely dissatisfied with their chosen academic field had difficulties following the learning process. Thus, they decided not to seek a related job and instead pursue careers in other work sectors. This partly explains the frequent mismatch between vocational high school graduates' jobs and their specializations. Meanwhile, some participants were fond of their vocational high school years despite their unintentional pursuit. Their positive experiences were mainly attributed to strong peer relationships, non-vocational subjects, and less academic pressure.

### ***Finding employment***

Many vocational high school graduates come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged family. Their initial motivation to enter vocational high school was to promptly join the labor market and have a source of income. They frequently overlook specific criteria when looking for employment opportunities and grab the first available option instead. Many participants expressed a strong inclination towards pursuing employment in factories, irrespective of their chosen discipline. The employment qualifications for factory positions often consist of a secondary school diploma, including vocational high school. They also typically offer salaries per the regulated regional minimum wage rates. Therefore, securing formal employment in a factory after they finish schooling becomes the most feasible aspiration. However, they face obstacles in achieving this aspiration, including job requirements demands and labor market competition.

### ***Ageism***

Age is a common criterion among employers in terms of job requirements. Many employers limit the maximum age of candidates for entry-level positions to target recent graduates. The practice leads to unequal opportunities for job seekers despite having equal qualifications, indicating age discrimination (Awaliyah et al., 2017). Since there are many more job seekers than job opportunities, fresh graduates may not secure satisfactory employment immediately after graduation. Many have to wait for a job or opt for low-paying jobs as they await better job prospects (Sutopo & Azca, 2013). However, the competition gets tighter in the following year since there are more recent graduates. The struggle becomes more tedious over time until they are too 'too old' to apply for a job. Thus, they might be unable to apply for jobs shortly, let alone be accepted.

*It is difficult now (to find work) ...because it is very hard to get into a factory if you are already 23 and above. Now, most of them are looking for 18-22 years old ... (Haris, Gunung Kidul, August 2023).*

Some participants also mentioned other challenging job requirements, including minimum work experience, physical appearance, and educational background. Nonetheless, the age requirement posed the most significant challenge for many graduates. To gain sufficient work experience, they must spend additional years after graduation. During the process, they potentially exceed the age limit imposed for most job vacancies targeting vocational high school graduates. Meanwhile, employment opportunities with extended age limits often require higher educational qualifications, which most cannot afford.

### *Lower competitiveness compared to higher education graduates*

The high influx of secondary and higher education graduates has intensified competition for employment opportunities. It presents significant challenges for young people with low educational backgrounds. Notably, individuals with secondary education attainment face limitations in finding decent jobs and earning potential (Sutopo & Azca, 2013). Consequently, many vocational high school graduates were showing signs of demotivation.

Companies often do not offer job opportunities specifically to vocational high school graduates. They usually set minimum educational requirements that include vocational high school graduates, forcing them to compete with higher education graduates for the same entry-level positions. Some contended that employers tend to prefer candidates with higher degrees compared to them despite possessing comparable skills. The repeated failure to compete for a job over an extended period led to low motivation and self-confidence for these graduates, which reflects the so-called ‘scarring effect’ (Furlong et al., 2018). Many felt outweighed in their efforts to secure a more desirable job and found themselves stuck in their current positions.

*...it is mostly like that nowadays, if you are looking for a job, they mostly ask for diploma or bachelor's degree graduates...that's why, after graduating from (vocational high school), you have to continue pursuing higher education if you wish to get a better job...nowadays, vocational high school graduates are already, well, not lagging behind, but there are fewer (employers) who are interested in hiring vocational high school graduates... (Fauzi, Kulon Progo, August 2023).*

In brief, the findings indicate that multiple factors impact the post-graduation outcomes of vocational high school graduates as they transition into the workforce. Their capacity to retain self-motivation despite various obstacles is the most crucial driver in their successful transition. The early period of selecting a vocational path is significantly affected by challenges arising from socio-cultural factors, particularly families' influence and economic background. Moreover, the individual's attributes, such as resilience and determination, significantly shape their educational journey and achievements. Despite their adequate qualifications and extensive work experience, vocational high school graduates face difficulties finding employment due to the labor market dynamic. Many individuals tend to exhibit higher levels of resilience when influenced by socio-cultural factors like financial constraints and familial obligations. This aligns with the intersection of various domains in the school-to-work transition of youth, as indicated by DeLuca's person-in-context model (DeLuca et al., 2015).

### *Coping strategies*

The convergence of different factors impacts the vocational high school graduates' approaches to navigating the shift from education to the professional realm. Some participants became passive, while others adopted a more proactive approach to address the transition challenges. Vocational high school graduates set their coping strategies by employing the skills and resources acquired during and after their studies. This study identifies three primary coping strategies facilitating the successful transition of vocational high school graduates: forging their mental preparedness, exploring novel skills, and utilizing their social capital.

### *Work-readiness attitude*

One of the prominent characteristics found among participants who have successfully transitioned into the workplace is their work readiness. Work readiness involves more than just technical skills and cognitive abilities; it also requires having a positive attitude towards working and being productive, which are predominantly the results of hands-on experience in working environments rather than classroom settings (Mason et al., 2009). As such, many graduates demonstrated unwavering perseverance to work in the face of countless obstacles. They contended that, on top of the practical work competencies, they benefited more from the work readiness skills obtained during vocational high school.

Many participants stated that the internship and teaching factory program in vocational high schools give them opportunities to learn workplace etiquette, work routines, and how to handle unexpected work situations. As such, many of them courageously seize any job opportunities despite not being in line with their competencies and having to learn the skills from scratch. The determination and adaptability enabled them to persevere and discover new opportunities outside their expertise.

Similarly, prior studies have found that self-confidence positively affects graduates' readiness to work and future employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007; Wahyudi et al., 2023). The lack of positive results for those with lower self-confidence is often due to their lack of courage to embark on the job-searching journey or cope with the challenges themselves (Beaumont et al., 2016). A positive aspiration and attitude towards future employment enables individuals to develop effective coping strategies during the transitional phase (Sulistibudi & Kadiyono, 2023).

### *Exploring new skills*

Undoubtedly, equipping the technical skill to perform the job is a critical aspect of employability (Herr & Long, 1983). However, many participants in this study struggled to find employment aligned with their specialization, rendering the technical skills they gained from vocational high school less beneficial. It is attributed to the technological advancement, which has led to diminished job availability and a shift in the demanded skills in the labor market (Herr & Long, 1983). Therefore, exploring new skills becomes a common strategy to navigate the labor market.

The results showed that participants engaged in two types of skills exploration. Firstly, those who could not find work in the linear sector or were dissatisfied with their studies decided to explore new skills and pursue another line of work. Often, this exploration began after participants secured employment that did not require specific technical skills or prior experience. Thus, they learned while experiencing the job. Secondly, some graduates developed more advanced skills in the same field to improve their career prospects. They accomplished it by self-learning, participating in free or paid training, or pursuing higher education.

However, this coping strategy involves multi-dimensional factors. While striving to improve their employability through acquiring new skills indicates their resilience (Isbah et al., 2023), economic constraints limit many young people to access paid training or further education (McInerney & Smyth, 2014). Despite these challenges, some participants displayed exceptional resilience by seeking paid training opportunities or went further by diligently searching for free skills development programs offered by the government or private sectors. Hence, it is important for the government to increase the availability and accessibility



of skill development programs to further support vocational high school graduates in navigating the dynamic and competitive labor market.

### *Social capital*

Despite the ‘promise’ of its benefits, graduating from a vocational high school does not guarantee immediate employment for its graduates. It is challenging to depend solely on their vocational skills amidst the scarcity of available jobs. Other recruitment requirements set by employers, such as age limit, minimum work experience, physical appearance, and so on, confine their opportunities. Therefore, previous studies have shown how young people had to utilize their social networks to escape unemployment (Naafs, 2012; Sutopo & Azca, 2013). It goes beyond their direct social networks and expands through their peers or family connections (Okumura, 2019).

Similarly, many participants in this study also had to rely on their social networks to navigate the job market. Many developed these networks through school, such as with teachers, alumni, peers, or internship supervisors. They leveraged their social networks to enhance their access to job opening information. Some still had to follow the selection procedure, whereas others could bypass the process and secure the job immediately. Many of them also went on to work for small businesses personally owned by relatives or friends. Notably, the findings of this study highlight the critical role of social capital in creating more accessible pathways to employment for the vocational high school graduates.

### ***The extent of vocational high school institutional roles***

The institutional roles of vocational high schools have a substantial influence on the

transition process of their students. DeLuca et al. (2015) highlighted that vocational institutions have the power to educate their students about the myriad factors that await them in their transition into the labor market. They can help the students navigate these factors and achieve satisfactory outcomes through ample support and services. Thus, this study also highlights the extensive support vocational high school graduates receive from their respective schools throughout their academic journey. The graduates’ point of view may not fully encompass the vast array of ways in which these roles have been enacted. However, their experiences hinted at several influential support, including career guidance, post-graduation tracking, and industry collaborative programs.

### *Career guidance*

Career guidance plays a pivotal role in vocational education. It helps students discover their strengths, build awareness of how the labor market system works, and integrate those to plan their future careers (OECD, 2004). It is fundamental to carry out career guidance at two crucial stages: before and during vocational education (Watts, 2010). Receiving career guidance before enrolment allows individuals to get comprehensive information regarding available vocational paths and prospective career options in those fields (Watts, 2010). Therefore, they can thoroughly consider their vocational choices to avoid future inconveniences during their education. Meanwhile, reviewing students’ career plans and accessing suitable job opportunities became the priorities of career guidance during the school years (Watts, 2010).

Many previous studies in Indonesia have highlighted the significance of career guidance in shaping vocational high school student’s future labor market outcomes

(e.g., Hambali, 2019; Martaningsih, 2018). However, most of those studies focus on the results of career guidance during school years. Similarly, Okumura (2019) insinuates that career guidance is an arrangement expected towards students' graduation. Thus, career guidance practice before students' enrolment in vocational education is often neglected.

The results of this study similarly insinuated that vocational high schools in Indonesia offer career guidance too late, resulting in adverse effects for students. Many participants shared that they lacked information about vocational options and professional paths before choosing their respective fields of study. Their knowledge was limited to vocational high schools being an alternative to secondary education that could help them enter the workforce immediately without pursuing further education. They had no opportunities to explore and identify their vocational interests and talents, which often led to dissatisfaction regarding their chosen fields of study and career prospects. Some of them had to re-establish their career plan from scratch after finishing their vocational high school. Thus, having early career guidance prior to schooling years would prevent students from 'wasting' their time pursuing the wrong discipline and reduce instances of career mismatch among vocational high school graduates.

#### *Post-graduation tracking*

Higher educational institutions provide ongoing support and monitoring for alums for an extended period following graduation. The aim is to track their graduates' current state and outcomes, which can be used as references for further improvement in their learning system (Kurrokhmat & Rohendi, 2022; Safi'i & Priyantoro, 2019). Therefore, post-graduation tracking is also essential in

vocational high schools to assess the school-to-work transition of alums. *Bursa Kerja Khusus/BKK* (Special Job Exchange Board) in every vocational high school is responsible for monitoring the graduates' progress, including identifying those currently seeking employment (Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2018). In order to facilitate the integration of these alums into the workforce, BKK is required to furnish information regarding available job openings. It implies that vocational high schools have a crucial role in supporting their students throughout the transition process, extending their support beyond graduation. This study found that the post-graduation monitoring standards differed between schools, resulting in different participant experiences. The process generally begins with the teachers mapping students' life plans toward graduation, whether they want to pursue further education, employment, or entrepreneurship. It is conducted to provide suitable assistance, such as preparing for university admission or job placement. Online group messaging platforms have become prevalent in monitoring alums and disseminating information regarding job opportunities. However, the group's activity lasts for a limited duration, typically lasting for one year after graduation, as teachers must shift their focus to the next cohort of graduates. Thus, older graduates must be more proactive in approaching the teachers to report and request further assistance regarding their employment status. Additionally, this study showed that the lack of clear guidelines regarding the assistance provided by BKK to vocational high school students, particularly in post-graduation tracking, has resulted in suboptimal transition outcomes for the graduates. Thus, it is imperative for the government to put additional measures in standardizing the operations across vocational high schools in Indonesia.

### *Collaborative programs with industries*

The government employs a strategy known as link-and-match to ensure that the outputs of vocational high school graduates align with the demands of the labor market. This strategy involves fostering collaboration between vocational high schools and industries, encompassing various initiatives such as involving industry professionals in curriculum development, learning practices, and facilitating internships (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2021). The integration between industries and vocational high schools aims to facilitate a smooth transition of vocational high school graduates into the workforce (Widiyanti et al., 2017). However, despite the efforts, a notable disparity in collaborative actions between vocational high schools and industries exists.

One of the government's mandates to BKK/Special Job Exchange Board is to channel their graduates with employment opportunities through collaborative engagement with employers or labor agencies (Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2018). This engagement typically takes the form of job fairs or visits from industries or labor agencies, offering recruitment opportunities for graduating students. Based on the graduates' experiences, there are notable differences among schools when it comes to cultivating successful partnerships with industries. The challenges of attracting industry partnerships are especially noticeable in less reputable schools. Graduates from these schools must actively seek information or participate in job fairs organized by other vocational high schools. However, they would have lower success rate since the respective schools would prioritize their students.

In addition, the disparities are not only between different schools but also across disciplines in the same schools.

Particular disciplines are more highly demanded in the labor market, resulting in increased cooperation with industries. Meanwhile, unpopular fields have fewer or no collaborative invitations from industries. Thus, there are significant disparities in access to resources among graduates that influence their transition trajectories.

*...my school organized a job fair, (but) half of the stands were filled with private universities (offering students to continue their studies)... (the companies that offer jobs) were only a few, and those (related) to Network Computer Engineering were almost non-existent...(the ones that got a lot of offers were) fashion and make up-beauty study program... (Savira, Bantul, August 2023).*

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while vocational high schools in Indonesia aim to mitigate youth unemployment, their effectiveness in addressing this issue remains doubtful. Despite the ongoing efforts to revitalize their function, they face persistent challenges. Moreover, the issue concerning vocational high school graduates' transition to the workforce extends beyond escaping unemployment to enhancing their employment prospects and overall job quality. This study focuses on capturing the challenges derived from the perspective of graduates transitioning from vocational high schools to the professional realm. Many graduates encountered difficulties from the moment they had to decide whether to pursue a vocational path for secondary education and determine the specific discipline. Various factors influenced their decisions, leading to diverse learning experiences that might not always be enjoyable. Furthermore, the graduates faced more hurdles as they competed in the labor market. They primarily relied on their work-ready mentality and

social networks to navigate the labor market effectively. On the institutional level, their respective schools also facilitated their entry into the labor market. However, disparities in the implementation exist. Hence, it is imperative to evaluate the vocational high school system to remove the obstacles and assist in the successful transition of their graduates.

This study provides insight into the challenges that must be addressed to revitalize the vocational high school system. The challenges, coping strategies, and institutional assistance should inform policymakers in improving the current state of vocational high schools in Indonesia. Fostering integrated collaborations with industries should go beyond narratives and be put into concrete actions. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of the pre-enrolment period in the discussions of revitalizing vocational high schools. The decisions made in the pre-admission set the tone for the learning and transition outcomes of prospective vocational high school students. It also highlights the pivotal roles of the school in assisting their transition journey.

Lastly, this study contributes by employing the 'person-in-context' model that was built as a framework to specifically address youth transition in a work-based education system. By adopting this comprehensive framework, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of variables that determine vocational high school graduates' transition outcomes. Scholarly speaking, this study extended the existing studies on Indonesian youth transition and aspirations that have focused on the influence of sociocultural and socioeconomic factors.

## Acknowledgement

The completion of this research was supported by funding from the University of Gadjah Mada through the Final Project Recognition (RTA) program.

## Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

## Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by Universitas Gadjah Mada.

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