

Employability Anxiety and Career Intention among Hospitality and Tourism Management Students: A Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Comparison Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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The COVID-19 pandemic has left the tourism industry with severe joblessness which affect hospitality and tourism management students. Based on gaps in the literature, the study examines the effects of COVID-19 on hospitality and tourism management students by examining the potential changes in their employability anxiety and career intention before and after the pandemic. It employed a quantitative retrospective pretest-posttest (RPP) research design. An online questionnaire was used to collect data from the chosen clusters of target respondent. Frequencies and a paired-samples t-test were used to analyze data from the 409 responses collected. Eta squared was used to calculate the effect size of the changes before and after COVID-19. Key findings suggest COVID-19 has increased the students' anxiety about securing a job in the industry and made them less inclined to pursue a tourism career after graduation. Tourism's vulnerability primarily drives their employability anxiety to external forces and perceived incompetence. The study concludes with suggestions to lower the students' employability anxiety, increase their intention to work in the industry, and restore their trust and confidence in tourism's job-creating ability and economic benefits, such as tourism resilience reassurance, the collaboration between academics and industry practitioners in post-COVID-19 tourism curriculum design, and the government's initiative to re-open tourism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of tourism in job creation is indisputable, given its labour-intensive nature and the significant multiplier effect on employment in related sectors. According to UNWTO's (2019) estimate, one job in the primary tourism sector created about one-and-a-half indirect jobs in the tourism-related economy. In 2019, the industry generated one in ten jobs globally (UNWTO, 2019), accounting for 334 million jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2021). However, the COVID-19 changed the tourism industry dramatically. Sixty-two million tourism jobs were lost globally in 2020, and the threat of more job losses looms large (WTTC, 2021). Tourism's current state of joblessness may create or heighten the employability anxiety of hospitality and tourism management (HTM) students. Current students may want to quit or withdraw from their current HTM programmes because of the uncertainty and pursue another major that is considered more secure in employment. The situation may also dissuade HTM students from pursuing a career in the industry. Moreover, the considerable unemployment plaguing the tourism industry may discourage potential students from enrolling in a HTM programme, thus reducing college and university admissions.

If the above scenarios materialize, the long-run effects on tourism can be devastating. HTM students play an essential role in the entire tourism ecosystem because they are the backbone of the professionally trained and qualified human resources required by tourism businesses (Hjalager & Andersen, 2001; Lo, 2005; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). As a service industry, tourism needs well-trained and qualified employees capable of consistently delivering excellent customer service, which is the cornerstone of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Unguren, Kacmaz & Kahveci, 2015). HTM students can well fulfil this industry's human resource need. The imperative function of HTM students in the entire tourism ecosystem cannot be overlooked. However, the current joblessness state of tourism caused by COVID-19 leaves us with a troubling question as to how the situation may have affected HTM students. Are they overwhelmed with anxiety about graduating with an HTM degree but unable to secure a job in the industry? Will this anxiety cause them to steer clear of tourism careers and pursue something that is less susceptible to unforeseen circumstances? Have they lost confidence and trust in the industry's job-creating ability and economic benefit?

When it comes to COVID-19 and tourism research, there is a dearth of studies conducted to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on HTM education (Tiwari et al., 2020; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020; Seraphin & Yallop, 2021; Ye & Law, 2021). Several researchers who have investigated tourism education within the context of COVID-19, such as Baum and Hai (2020), Bilslund et al. (2020), Tiwari et al. (2020), Unguren and Huseyinli (2020), Seraphin and Yallop (2021), and Ye and Law (2021), have emphasized the need to explore the impact of COVID-19 on tourism education because research in the area is underrepresented. Given the severe joblessness effect of COVID-19 on tourism, this study seeks to examine the potential changes in HTM students' employability anxiety and career intention before and after the pandemic. The study contributes to the scant literature related to COVID-19's impact on HTM students and imparts an understanding of how the present joblessness state in the industry has affected HTM students' employability anxiety and career plans. With that, practical suggestions can be made to tourism educators, the industry, and the government on the pathway forward for tourism education post-COVID-19. The paper is presented in the following manner: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tourism Employment

Human capital is one of the most important capitals for tourism. People are an inherent nature of the industry (UNWTO, 2014) – visitors, employees, suppliers/businesses, local people, and governments (Cook et al., 2018). Many tourism products and services are about people and involve people, either as part of attractions and entertainment or as an integral part of the expertise offered to ensure effective operation and further development of the industry (UNWTO, 2014). A high-quality skilled workforce is of absolute importance to tourism. It is needed to ensure the delivery and quality of tourism products and services (UNWTO, 2014). It also provides greater competitiveness and innovation, improves job prospects, and eases the adjustment process in changing markets (UNWTO, 2014). Tourism education can create a high-quality skilled workforce by properly equipping students with courses and skills to become professionally trained employees who possess talents across skill levels for the industry (Hjalager & Andersen, 2001; Lo, 2005, Kunwar, 2018; Tiwari et al., 2021).

Tourism's employment benefits are widely recognized. Between 2014 and 2019, the industry created 1 in 4 net new jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2021). In 2019, the sector accounted for 334 million jobs, meaning 10.6% of all jobs (WTTC, 2021). The industry's job-creating power is one of the top reasons students choose a HTM major. Huyton (1997) reported Chinese students pursued a HTM program because they were motivated by the belief that the hospitality and tourism industry provided more job opportunities. Lee et al. (2006) discovered that job opportunity was the second most crucial factor driving Hong Kong students to pursue a degree in HTM. American students enrolled in a HTM major had the same result (Lee et al., 2014). Alas, COVID-19 may have painted a dark and uncertain state for the prospect of employment in tourism. In 2020, only 272 million people were employed across the industry worldwide, representing a loss of 62 million jobs or a decrease of 18.5% compared to 2019's figures (WTTC, 2021). Moreover, millions of the remaining jobs could be lost without the full recovery of the industry (WTTC, 2021).

As HTM students are part of the entire tourism ecosystem, they may have been directly and indirectly impacted by COVID-19. Employability anxiety may be one area of significant concern. One factor often cited as a contributor to HTM students' employability anxiety is the industry's structural characteristics that make it vulnerable to external factors (e.g., pandemics, natural catastrophes, man-made disasters, financial crises). Tourism vulnerability can result in unwanted impacts such as job losses and an uncertain future (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). Thus, COVID-19 could have intensified HTM students' perceived job insecurity and limited career opportunities in tourism (Baum & Hai, 2020). The other two common factors are perceived incompetence, which is associated with the feeling that the skills and knowledge gained from college/university do not meet the requirements and expectations of the industry (Tahmassian & Jalali-Moghadam, 2011; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020), and personal attributes that are often experienced by students who do not choose an HTM program willingly and knowingly (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020).

2.2 Research Gap

Although there is quite a vast number of studies analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, research on the pandemic's effect on HTM education remains scarce (Bau, & Hai, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2020; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020; Seraphin & Yallop, 2021; Ye & Law, 2021). In a search on research articles associated with the impact of COVID-19 on HTM

education via Google Scholar using such keywords as tourism students, tourism education and COVID-19, only 10 out of the 100 analyzed articles were directly related to HTM education and COVID-19. These articles only focused on several areas: 1) the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on HTM educators and students, such as graduate employability, educators' engagement, students' hope, academic satisfaction and loyalty intention (Sato et al., 2021; Ye & Law, 2021; Zhong et al., 2021; Lei & So, 2021), 2) the changes brought by COVID-19 to tourism education such as the use of technology to support and facilitate online tourism education (Qiu et al., 2020), virtual training and internships (Bilsland et al., 2020; Park & Jones, 2021) and tourism skills and knowledge deemed vital after COVID-19 (Tiwari et al., 2020; Sato et al., 2021), and 3) the future of tourism academia (Edelheim, 2020; Wassler & Fan, 2021).

Even before COVID-19, research on HTM education lacks acknowledgment (Baum et al., 2016; Tiwari et al., 2020). Ballantyne et al. (2009) highlighted that research on tourism education and training represented only 2% of the 21 tourism research articles they analyzed. Research has been predominantly related to pedagogy within tourism education, focusing on curriculum issues (Fidgeon, 2010). Thus, several researchers have emphasized a need to close the gap in the literature (Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2020; Bilsland et al., 2020). By focusing on HTM students' employment anxiety and career intention within the context of COVID-19, the current study specifically responds to the calls of Unguren and Huseyinli (2020) to conduct empirical research on the impact of COVID-19 on tourism education and HTM students' career plan, and of Tiwari et al. (2020) to examine HTM students' feedback on the effects of COVID-19 on their career.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

The current study employed a quantitative retrospective pretest-posttest (RPP) design. It collected quantifiable data on pre-and post-COVID-19 employability anxiety and career intention and performed statistical tests on these data. Using RPP, the study attempted to gauge the degree of change in tourism students' employability anxiety and career intention before and after COVID-19. RPP design was used instead of the traditional pretest-posttest (TPP) model because of the latter design's significant limitations in capturing change (lack of self-awareness at pretest, socially desirable responding, retest effects, and test reactivity). The RPP model has been recommended as an alternative to reduce response shift bias and capture actual change effects, especially when measuring noncognitive constructs such as beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and skills (Moore & Tananis, 2009; Little et al., 2019). Using the RPP method, respondents were not given a pretest (before COVID-19). They answered the online questionnaire only during the post-test period (after COVID-19), during which they were requested to report their employability anxiety and career intention, at the same time, retrospectively think back to the time before the pandemic about their anxiety level to secure a job in tourism and their plan to work in the industry after graduation.

3.2 Sampling Design

The study solely involved hospitality and tourism higher learning institutions in Sabah due to Malaysia's large HTM student population (according to IDP Connect (2021), about 43 colleges and universities offer HTM programmes in the country). Due to the large target population, cluster sampling was used to select the sample. HTM students across hospitality and tourism higher learning institutions in Sabah were divided into several clusters based on several identifiable characteristics, including location, types of institutions (universities and colleges),

types of programmes (tourism management), and program level (Diploma). Based on these characteristics, the sample is composed of students majoring in Diploma in Tourism Management at eight universities and colleges, namely Almacrest International College, Asian Tourism International College (ATIC), Cosmopoint College, Geomatika College, Kinabalu Commercial College (KCC), MSU College Sabah, University College Sabah Foundation (UCSF), and Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah (UiTM Sabah). A total of 409 undergraduate tourism students from the selected higher learning institutions participated in the online survey.

3.3 Survey Instrument

An online questionnaire was employed due to the COVID-19-related movement restrictions imposed by the government and the fact that students were doing online and distant classes. It consisted of three sections, namely Section A examined the respondents' employability anxiety and career intention before COVID-19, Section B asked about the respondents' demographic profile and program enrolment information, and Section C included the same items as in Section A, but they measured employability anxiety and career intention after COVID-19. The measurement items included in the questionnaire were primarily adapted from several prior studies that explored tourism students' attitudes toward tourism careers and employability anxiety, such as Jiang and Tribe (2009), Richardson (2009), Richardson and Butler (2012), Wu et al. (2014) and Unguren and Huseyinli (2020).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The study used an online questionnaire created using Google Forms to collect data. The data were collected between February 2021 and May 2021. The program coordinators at the chosen eight universities and colleges were contacted via email with a request to share the online questionnaire with their students enrolled in Diploma in Tourism Management. Two successive emails were sent to the program coordinators in April 2021 to obtain more respondents. Using the RPP method, the respondents self-assessed their employability anxiety and career intention after COVID-19 and retrospectively reflected on their employability and career plans before COVID-19.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Respondents' Profile and Program Enrolment

The respondents' profile and program enrolment information are presented in Table 1. Gender distribution was 75% female and the remaining 25% male. There might be significantly more female than male respondents because of the general trend of more female than male students in colleges and universities in Malaysia. The number of male students has declined steadily since 2016, and in 2020, female students outnumbered male students by 81% (Hirschmann, 2022). The response rates of the chosen eight institutions were as follows: Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah (28.9%), Asian Tourism International College (17.1%), University College Sabah Foundation (15.4%), Almacrest International College (14.7%), Kinabalu Commercial College (10.5%), Cosmopoint College (7.8%), MSU College Sabah (4.4%) and Geomatika College (1.2%). 32.5% of the respondents were in their first year of study, 47.7% in their second year, and the remaining 19.8% were in their final year. Generally, HTM degrees in Malaysia will take 2 to 2.5 years to complete. A handful of the respondents were in semester six or above because they extended the duration of their study because of taking a semester off, repeating and deferring specific courses. The HTM program was a top choice for 70% of the respondents (meaning they chose it willingly and knowingly). The remaining 30% enrolled in the program

unwillingly and did not know what to expect. Respondents who pursued HTM voluntarily and knowingly indicated the following top five reasons for their pursuit: social and cultural interaction opportunities (64.8%), job opportunities (57.9%), international career and mobility opportunities (53.1%), interest (36.9%), and versatile skills and knowledge (32.8%).

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Socio-demographic Characteristic		Percentage
Gender	Female	74.8%
	Male	25.2%
Institution	UiTM Sabah	28.9%
	ATIC	17.1%
	UCSF	15.4%
	Almacrest	14.7%
	KCC	10.5%
	Cosmopoint	7.8%
	MSU Sabah	4.4%
Current semester	Geomatika	1.2%
	1 and 2	32.5%
	3 and 4	47.7%
The decision to enrol in the HTM program	5 and above	19.8%
	Chose willingly & knowingly; top choice	69.2%
	Didn't choose willingly & knowingly; what was offered	30.8%
Top reasons for enrolling in the HTM program	Social & cultural interaction	64.8%
	Attractive job opportunities	57.9%
	International career/movement opportunities	53.1%
	Interest	36.9%
	Adaptable tourism skills	32.8%
	Plan to start a tourism business	18.3%
	An alternative career in tourism	14.2%
Some tourism work experience	6.6%	

4.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Frequencies were obtained to analyze the respondents' demographic and program enrolment data. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the respondents' employment anxiety and career intention before and after COVID-19. The test is appropriate and used when the sample involves only one group and when data are collected on two different occasions or under other circumstances (Pallant, 2016). To measure the magnitude of COVID-19's effect on the respondents' employability anxiety and career intention before and after COVID-19, eta squared (η^2) was used to calculate the effect size using the formula below (Pallant, 2016):

$$\eta^2 = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + N - 1}$$

To interpret the eta squared values, the researcher referred to Cohen's (1988) guidelines where 0.01 = small effect, 0.06 = moderate effect, 0.14 = large effect.

4.3 Reliability Test

A scale reliability test was performed on the pre- and post-COVID-19 scale items. As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for pre-pandemic and post-pandemic items are 0.762 and 0.755, respectively, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency reliability for the scale within the chosen sample (Pallant, 2016).

Table 2. Scale Reliability Test

Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items
Pre-COVID-19 employability anxiety and career intention	0.762	13
Post-COVID-19 employability anxiety and career intention	0.755	13

4.4 Comparisons Between Before and After COVID-19

The results of the comparisons between the respondents' employability anxiety and career intention before and after COVID-19 are presented in Table 3. There was a statistically significant increase in the sample's employability anxiety post-COVID-19 [$M=3.98$, $SD=.929$, $t(408)=-6.61$, $p<.05$] compared to pre-COVID-19 ($M=3.59$, $SD=.909$), with η^2 value of 0.10 (moderate effect). Furthermore, after COVID-19, the sample's confidence in getting a job in tourism after graduation statistically decreased [$M=3.02$, $SD=.911$, $t(408)=21.00$, $p<.05$] compared to before COVID-19 ($M=4.13$, $SD=.773$), with η^2 value of 0.52 (large effect).

Table 3. Comparisons between before and after COVID-19

Items	Before		After		t-value	df	P	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD				
Employability anxiety¹								
Anxiety level about getting a job in hospitality/tourism after graduation	3.59	0.909	3.98	0.929	-6.61	408	.000	0.10
Confidence in getting a job in hospitality/tourism after graduation	4.13	0.773	3.02	0.911	21.00	408	.000	0.52
Attributes of employability anxiety¹								
Tourism vulnerability	3.06	1.007	3.77	1.022	-11.66	408	.000	0.25
Perceived incompetence	3.17	.961	3.68	0.981	-9.00	408	.000	0.17
Personal attributes	2.89	.983	3.42	1.014	-9.78	408	.000	0.19
Career intention²								
Plan to work after graduation	4.39	0.766	3.65	0.928	14.71	408	.000	0.35
See a bright future working in the hospitality/tourism industry	4.23	0.802	3.35	0.879	16.98	408	.000	0.41

¹Measured on a scale of high/low level where 1 – very low and 5 – very high

²Measured on a scale of agreement where 1 – strongly disagree and 5 – strongly agree

M = mean; SD = standard deviation; df = degree of freedom; P = significant level (2-tailed); η^2 = eta squared value

The respondents were asked to assess the three factors commonly cited as contributors to HTM students' employability anxiety. Overall, there was a statistically significant increase in all the factors contributing to the respondents' employability anxiety, all with η^2 values higher than 0.14 (large effect):

1. Perceived incompetence: ($t[408]=-9.00$, $p<.05$; $M_{\text{before}}=3.17$, $SD=.961$; $M_{\text{after}}=3.68$, $SD=.981$; $\eta^2=0.17$).
2. Personal attributes: ($t[408]=-9.78$, $p<.05$; $M_{\text{before}}=2.89$, $SD=.983$; $M_{\text{after}}=3.42$, $SD=1.014$; $\eta^2=0.19$).
3. Tourism vulnerability: ($t[408]=-11.66$, $p<.05$; $M_{\text{before}}=3.06$, $SD=1.007$; $M_{\text{after}}=3.77$, $SD=1.022$; $\eta^2=0.25$).

The above results also implied that after COVID-19, tourism vulnerability was the most significant factor contributing to HTM students' employability anxiety, followed by perceived incompetence and personal attributes. Before COVID-19, the order was perceived as incompetence, tourism vulnerability, and personal attributes. In terms of career intention, there was a statistically significant decrease in the respondents' plan to work in tourism after graduation post-COVID-19 [$M=3.65$, $SD=.928$, $t(408)=14.71$, $p<.05$] compared to pre-COVID-19 ($M=4.39$, $SD=.766$), with η^2 value of 0.35 (large effect). Furthermore, there was also a statistically significant decrease in the respondents' ability to envisage a bright future working in the industry after COVID-19 ($M=3.35$, $SD=.879$, $t(408)=16.98$, $p<.05$) compared to before COVID-19 ($M=4.23$, $SD=.802$), with $\eta^2=0.41$ (large effect).

5. DISCUSSION

The results suggest that COVID-19 has increased HTM students' anxiety about securing a job in the industry and made them less inclined to pursue a tourism career after graduation. Higher employability anxiety and decreased career intention may indicate their faltering confidence and trust in tourism's employment-generating ability and economic benefit. HTM students' higher employability anxiety after COVID-19 is understandable. The pandemic has created a gloomy outlook and a hopeless state of joblessness for tourism. COVID-19 has raged for almost two years now, and it does not seem to be subsiding. The recent emergence of the Delta variant, which is much more transmissible than the Alpha variant and the original virus found in Wuhan, has caused a dramatic spike in COVID-19 infection rates around the globe. The entire situation causes so much uncertainty about the eventual end of the pandemic and paints an even bleaker future for tourism. The threat of job losses in the industry persists. Informal dialogues with many who previously worked in the tourism industry revealed that they are now doing utterly different work, such as farming, becoming an insurance agent, being involved in a delivery job, or running a small-scale business. The program coordinators at the chosen eight institutions have also mentioned the difficulty of their final-semester HTM students in securing a placement for industrial training. To illustrate, in the October 2020 – February 2021 semester, 40 out of the 136 final-semester HTM students at UiTM Sabah failed to secure industrial training placement at travel agencies, tour operators, tourist destinations, or other tourism-related companies. Before COVID-19, getting an industrial training placement was never an issue or a concern. This situation may cause HTM students to ask questions such as "*can I find a placement for my industrial training. Will I be employable in the industry after graduation?*"

Improving job prospects is one of the main reasons for attending university (Beaumont et al., 2016; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). The results show that employment opportunity was a top reason for the respondents to pursue an HTM program, in line with the findings of some previous researchers such as Huyton (1997), Lee et al. (2006), and Lee et al. (2014). But, alas,

for as long as COVID-19 still rages, job prospects for HTM students remain bleak. The sombre future of tourism employment is expected to prolong after the pandemic is over. This is because COVID-19 has had devastating effects on international tourism that the industry went back to levels 30 years ago, and a return to pre-pandemic levels could take 2.5 to 4 years (UNWTO, 2020). Naturally, the current state of joblessness in tourism and higher employability anxiety may cause HTM students to pursue a career outside the industry after graduation. The results indicate that tourism vulnerability is the main factor contributing to HTM students' employability anxiety. It is an inherent characteristic of tourism to be susceptible to external forces such as crises and disasters, making employment in the industry perceived as less permanent or less stable than in non-service industries. This inherent characteristic can turn the industry upside down, stripping it of its positive capabilities, as evidenced by COVID-19. Therefore, it is a risk that needs to be understood and accepted by HTM students and tourism employees. HTM students who are risk-averse may become so discouraged by tourism's vulnerability to COVID-19 that they may decide to steer clear of tourism jobs after they graduate and pursue a career in an industry that has a reputation for being stable and secure.

COVID-19 has also intensified HTM students' sense that the knowledge and skills they are getting from the university are not sufficient or not compatible with the expectations and requirements of the industry. The pandemic has forced a sudden shift from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning, thus changing how assessments are structured and graded and reducing students' engagement with lecturers and classmates. The transition may result in an overall sense that the quality of education is less than the pre-pandemic educational standard. For HTM students specifically, the feeling of getting a reduced quality of the tourism degree they are pursuing may be attributable to their deprived opportunities to engage in experiential learning activities that are inherent in HTM programmes, such as hands-on training in the use of industry-specific systems, field trips, and professional training.

Since HTM students play an essential role in providing professionally trained and qualified human resources required by the industry, the study highlights an urgent need to lower their employability anxiety, increase their intention to work in the industry, and restore their trust and confidence in tourism's job-creating ability and economic benefit. One way of doing so may be for HTM educators to instill a profound understanding and confidence in students that while tourism is susceptible to external factors, it is also highly resilient. Throughout the history of tourism, the industry has been affected by crises and disasters time and again (SARS in 2002, a tsunami in 2004, a bird flu outbreak in 2009, a global economic crisis in 2009, MERS in 2012, Ebola in 2013-14, Zika outbreaks in 2016). Yet, in all cases, tourism bounced back, even improved to become more resilient. Presentation of such information to HTM students may help inject a dose of trust and confidence in tourism's resilience and its enormous employment-generating ability.

COVID-19 has most likely changed tourism in specific ways. Changes in the industry call for changes in tourism education so that there is compatibility between what tourism education provides and what the tourism industry requires. Academics and industry practitioners have worked together in tourism curriculum design before COVID-19. After the pandemic, there is an urgent need for academics and industry practitioners to sit down again and discuss how the pandemic has changed the industry and reflect those changes in the tourism curriculum so that the future of the entire tourism ecosystem will be safer, more resilient and more sustainable. Tiwari et al. (2020) discovered that from tourism academics' perspective, COVID-19 had emphasized a change in tourism academic course structure where students are taught the skills related to crisis management, risk management, health and safety measures in tourism, business continuity, and tourism resilience. The industrial perspective on the skills and knowledge to be

prioritized after COVID-19 should also be sought. A tourism curriculum designed from the views of academics and industry practitioners can increase HTM students' perceived competence.

The Malaysian government is gradually reopening the tourism sector. Although such a move might seem unwise due to the risk of virus transmission, the tourism sector cannot be shut down until there are no more infection cases. International tourism may be off the table, but domestic tourism can be progressively re-opened with precautionary measures. The Malaysian government can re-start domestic tourism by creating safe travel bubbles within the country. Moreover, proactive safety measures such as mandatory mask-wearing, frequent sanitization, limiting operational capacity, and allowing only those with complete vaccines to travel should be enforced. The reopening of domestic tourism is essential to rebuilding the tourism economy to creating employment opportunities in the tourism industry.

6. CONCLUSION

The study investigated the impact of COVID-19 on HTM students by examining potential changes in their employability anxiety and career intention before and after the pandemic. The findings suggest that COVID-19 has increased HTM students' anxiety about securing a job in the industry and made them less inclined to pursue a tourism career after graduation. HTM students' employability anxiety is primarily driven by tourism's structural characteristics that make it susceptible to external forces such as COVID-19 and the students' perceived incompetence attributable to the shift from face-to-face learning to online and distance learning. The findings call for an urgent need to take measures to lower HTM students' employability anxiety, increase their intention to work in the industry after graduation, and restore their trust and confidence in tourism's job-creating ability and economic benefits, such as tourism resilience reassurance, a collaboration between academicians and industry practitioners in tourism curriculum design post-COVID-19, and the government's initiative to re-open tourism.

The study is not without limitations. The RPP research approach can raise insufficient recall and the potential for fabricated or biased responses. To minimize the issue, pre-COVID-19 questions constituted the first section of the questionnaire (Section A) and the post-COVID-19 items in the last section (Section C), with an additional section (Section B) placed in between to create some sense of time or space between before and after COVID-19 in the same questionnaire. Moreover, the order of questions in Section A and Section C was reshuffled, and the questions were phrased differently but still held the same meaning or intention. Also, using an online questionnaire may discriminate against students with a poor Internet connection, thus, are unable to access the survey. Internet problem is quite common in Sabah, particularly in remote areas. There is still much to be investigated in tourism education and COVID-19. Future studies are encouraged to conduct a thorough examination of the essential academic courses taught to HTM students post-COVID-19 from the perspectives of academics and industry practitioners. Such analysis is needed in designing a proper tourism curriculum. This ensures that tourism education is aligned with the current need of the tourism industry.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The single author wrote the paper and did all the work, from questionnaire design to data collection, and data analysis using SPSS. She wrote all the sections that constitute the entire article (i.e., Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results and Discussion, Conclusion and Implications, and References).

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The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Survey Instrument

Variable	Items/Questions
Career Intention	Planned to work in the tourism/hospitality industry after graduation.
	Could see bright future in the tourism/hospitality industry.
Employability Anxiety	Confidence in working in tourism/hospitality industry.
	Anxiety about getting a job in the tourism/hospitality industry after graduation.
Attributes of Employability Anxiety	Feeling of incompetence.
	Personal attributes
	Structural characteristics of tourism/hospitality industry

Note: The same items were asked to measure students' perceptions before and after COVID-19

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