

Is There a Suitable Job for Special Educational Need Children in Skill based Employment?

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education, Malaysia have seen vocational education as one of the important aspects that should be emphasized in Malaysia education system. Vocational and skill-based education has been further enhanced through the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) when more children with special needs to be included in vocational and skill-based education. Prior to that, the ministry through various Malaysia Development Plans has developed four fully residential vocational schools for special need students to prepare them for a future in Technical and Vocational Education and Training. However, until today the participation of special need children in the workforce that match to their skill is still low. This qualitative study adopted two qualitative data collection method which are systematic review and interview intend to understand the job matching and employability for SEN in skill-based employment and to explore the employer perspective of hiring SEN in skill-based employment. Findings shows that special need students who graduated from the vocational schools has to compete with other mainstream school leavers in order to secure a place in the workforce. This article attempts to understand the reasons behind job-mismatch among people with disability and the employer concerns of these groups of workers.

Keywords: Employability, Inclusive, Job Matching, Special Educational Needs, TVET

Introduction

In Malaysia, it is reported that one in ten persons with disabilities (PWD) is able to find work in the open market (The Straits Times News, 2017). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8: "Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" helps to improve the ability of persons with disability (PWD) to be in the workforce by aiming to provide a productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and PWD. On top of that, SDG 8 also targeted to achieve an equity for everyone including PWD works in the skill-based employment.

The demographic of the labor market for an advanced country is based on matching between demand and supplies as well as the efficiency of the market support system. As Malaysia is now moving towards becoming an advanced country, therefore more jobs opportunities has been created for Malaysian that soon will benefits the economic growth (Economic Planning

Unit, 2015). The effect from rapid development and active economic growth has attracted many investors to come to Malaysia and invest in our rapid developing economy. It is proven that employers shows a greater interest towards personal attributes and skills over pure academic credentials (Cheong et al., 2019). However, issues that has been long rooted in our system is when employers are still having the negative stigma towards PWD in the skill-based workforce (Osukwu, 2019). Osukwu (2019) in the same study mentioned that employers are generally do not believe that persons with disabilities can work and they have the stigma that most PWD especially women are lack with skills to gain employment. The impact from these negative stigma has brought the employment rates of PWD in the market substantially lower than the rates for persons without disabilities. (Hoque et al., 2014; Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2017; Verulava & Bedianashvili, 2021) in developed and developing countries (World Bank Group, 2018).

Malaysia through Eleventh Malaysia Plan (RMK-11) has pledge to create more job opportunities that require highly skilled workers. There will be more opportunities for PWD to have place in the mainstream workforce as well as to contribute to economic development which also can avoid poverty and hunger (Santana, 2000). The plan by the Government of Malaysia is to fulfill the supplies for an industrial workforce and to maintain the economic growth for the future. Therefore, the research question of this study is (i) to know to what extend the job matching and employability for SEN are based on skill-based employment for SEN graduated from vocational special education secondary schools? and (ii) what is the employer concern on skill-based employment among SEN graduated from vocational special education secondary schools?

Literature Review

The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is a modern agenda with vision towards industry-led programs and producing skilled and talented workers. Although the government with many industrial players have been working together to create more job opportunities for PWD's, the rate of hiring is still low (Yusof et al., 2014) and concerning the pool of unemployed skilled PWD's in the community. Therefore, the Government of Malaysia has initiated a comprehensive *Pelan Tindakan Orang Kurang Upaya* (PTOKU) 2016-2020 with ten strategic shifts to empower PWD. The second pillar in PTOKU pledge to "... To increase the participation of the disabled in the open, inclusive and accessible job market to enable them to live independently and contribute to the development of the country..." (Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat, 2016, p 21-26). The objective is to promote the involvement of disabled people in vocational training and other employment support programs provided by the government, private sector and NGOs.

Malaysia has been focusing on the development of TVET at all levels including introducing more courses for school children. The Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia realizes that education is the primary contributor to human capital. Therefore, MOE under the supervision of the Special Education Division has introduced fully residential vocational school that offered various vocational courses. The MOE Malaysia aware that TVET should be introduced at school level to developed interest among students and developed basic skills for them. All vocational schools under MOE are now using the National Occupational Skill Standard (NOSS) as an outline for vocational curriculum. NOSS is piled with essential competencies required by a skilled worker in a particular field (Yusof et al., 2014).

Vocational schools for disabled students was developed under various Malaysia Plan (RMK) with the intention to provide basic vocational skills for SEN. The skills will help them to be able to survive after completing their training and soon be able to have a specific skill as a basic before they join the workforce. As of today, MOE Malaysia has four Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools or known as *Sekolah Menengah Pendidikan Khas Vokasional* (SMPKV) with 870 SEN students recorded in the system in 2020 (Special Education Division, 2021).

A local study found that 69 out of 99 (69.7%) SEN graduated from the vocational institution had got the jobs after finishing school (Yusof et al., 2014). Even though the number represent 69.7% of the students but the question is whether the job is match to their qualification. Despite of all the trainings and number of qualified school leavers from SMPKV, recent study shows that the employability level among graduated SEN students from SMPKV Indahpura is at moderate level (Izam et al., 2019). Job matching is referred to the degree of which an individual's knowledge, preferences, and specific skills meets the job requirements and demands (Bhat, 2014). Therefore, the objective of this study is to understand job matching in skill-based employment among SEN who graduated from vocational special education secondary schools.

Provision of Vocational Education for Special Educational Needs Students

The National Education Development Plan (2006 – 2010) has placed several strategies that include providing vocational education for students with special needs. In general, SEN students have difficulties in academic learning (Hayes & Bulat, 2017) especially when it comes to formal national education when they have to compete with mainstream students. However, vocational education is an alternative for this group of students where it can provide more skills training and less academic. It is hoped that SEN students graduating from vocational schools can lead to opportunities to become skilled workers and enhance their quality of living so they can contribute to national development.

In order to do so, MOE through RMK has developed four fully residential vocational schools for SEN namely SMPKV Shah Alam, Selangor in RMK-5, SMPKV Indahpura, Johor in RMK-8, SMPKV Kuantan, Pahang and SMPKV Merbok, Kedah in RMK-9. Through vocational schools for students with disabilities, SEN are no longer have to hide their disabilities in order to penetrate to mainstream vocational schools and they also can learn vocational syllabus based on their own pace and their abilities. For SEN students who attends a vocational education in a vocational special education secondary school may be extended for a further period of one year (Attorney General Chambers of Malaysia, 2013). Therefore, they have a sufficient time to complete their courses and learn as much skills as possible before completing their vocational training. Vocational school for SEN provides same vocational courses just like other vocational schools. SEN students can learn and increase their opportunities gain access to technical and vocational education. The curriculum developed for vocational education in a secondary vocational special education secondary school are suitable for all categories of special needs.

Statistically in 2014, 70% of SEN students graduated from the vocational institution had got the jobs (Yusof et al., 2014). Rutkowski et al (2006); Yusof et al (2014) stated that graduates from vocational schools have higher chances to be hired as compared to their peers in the

mainstream. However, courses offered in vocational special education secondary schools are very limited and they themselves are competing among each other to have their spot in the workforce. However, according to the statistics of employment and labor force published by the Ministry of Human Resource (MOHR), there are only five learning disabilities people had placed themselves in the public sector which also the lowest percentage among other disabilities. Adding on to the statistics, the Department of Statistics Malaysia stated that as of January 2019, there are 515,600 people in which 3.3% as compared to 728,100 unemployed in July 2021, which is 4.5% (Main Statistics Labor Force Malaysia, 2021). Therefore, in some cases, PWD's choose to remain discreet because they are afraid that their disabilities will jeopardize their careers should they disclose themselves (Santuzzi et al., 2014). PWD's are not given the opportunity according to their skills but rather any job that they can fit in. Therefore, it is the high time for PWDs to acquire the recent market-relevant job skills to be able to place themselves in the market (Kwan, 2019).

The Employment Cycle

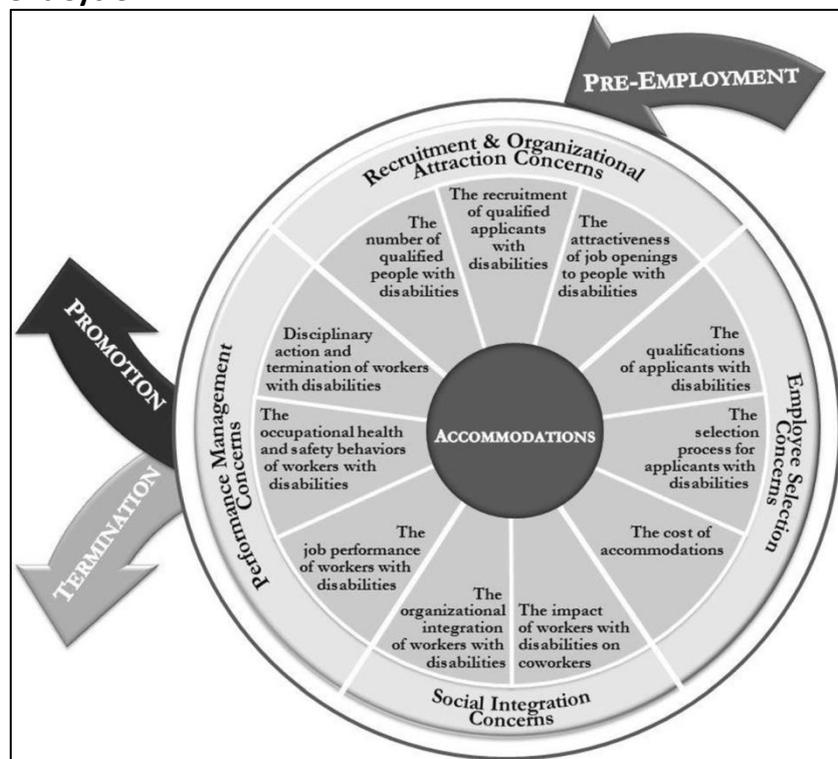


Figure 1: The employment cycle and employers' concerns about people with disabilities
 Source: The Participation of People with Disabilities in The Workplace Across The Employment Cycle : Employer Concerns and Research Evidence (Bonaccio et al., 2020)

Bonaccio et al (2020) has introduced the employment cycle which considers every factor that influences the employer to hire a person with disabilities. The model was built on the assumption that employer and employee relationship begin when both parties have the same mutual demand and supply socialization and active recruitment. There are four stages in the cycle covering pre-recruitment, promotion and termination including concern on recruitment and organizational attraction, employee selection, social integration and management performances. Overall, industry players required to provide accommodation and basic training before hiring PWD's. Somehow, this investment will benefited both parties and boost

productivity, promotes commitment, reduce the rate of turnover, and have positive effects on all co-workers' attitudes (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

Table 1

The Issues Regarding Employment for Persons with Disabilities

Phase	Issues
Recruitment and Organizational Attraction Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-employment phase is considering the numbers of supplies and the qualification of the candidates. • Most of PWD are feel insecure to expose themselves and their disability. • Confidence has cause PWD withdraw from immerse in mainstream workforce. • Number of jobs opening match with PWD abilities is important to ensure they are suitable to do the job. • Employee try as hard as possible to hide their disabilities from the employer. • lack of knowledge on disability-related issues.
Employee Selection Concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competing with normal people in the workforce and job qualification's requirements from the industry.
Social Integration Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration and eliminating segregation among co-workers.
Performance Management Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciplinary and integrity among PWD. • Employees with disabilities are more exposed to injuries working in hazardous work environments that is unsafe.

Inclusivity at Work

For many PWDs, work is key to economic freedom, health and well-being and sense of acceptance in the community. Even though jobs for this population were mostly provided in segregated settings like occupational therapy or sheltered workshops (Galer, 2014; Kocman et al., 2018), employment for PWD is not only economically important, but it also helps to improve their financial and reduce gaps to their rights in employability, self-worth and inclusiveness as well as respect. We teach the students at school to celebrate the differences among their friends and it should be carried out up to the workplaces. A harmonious environment among employee can be started at the workplace by adapting the spirit of inclusion environment and buddy system for all staff. Once the spirit is already in the system, soon it will be much easier for everyone to facilitate employment for people with disabilities (Kaletta et al., 2012).

Adopting an inclusion environment requires all workers to be considerate and responsible to each other. It is proven that inclusion among PWD and other workers is imperative to create a positive environment workplace from the aspect of social, cultural and workers well-being (Saidi et al., 2018; Verulava & Bedianashvili, 2021; Yamatani et al., 2015). Inclusion allows co-workers to expose themselves with PWD and at the same time this will create an awareness to have more disable people to join the industry.

Ideally, employees should hire a disable person who is qualified and able to deliver within their limitations caused by disability on an individual case-by-case basis (Toritsyn & Kabir, 2013). However, hiring PWD has a lot of positive benefits from economic and social aspects. Employers showed a greater concern to hire a disable person during the recruitment phase rather than during the placement and accommodation stages. The reason behind it is that when employers provide reasonable accommodation based on their needs, the staff can become less disabled (Kwan, 2019). All staff including disabled workers are required to develop good work habits. Although they have been accommodated with some changes, they have to show encouraging performances. The fears are not more likely to injure disable workers or others than those without disabilities. Furthermore, employees with disabilities are more exposed to injuries working in hazardous work environments that is unsafe environment around them (Breslin et al., 2018). Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that workplace accommodations provided by employers can effectively support PWD's in maintaining workplace safety (Anand & Sevak, 2017).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative method with two qualitative research designs which is literature review and descriptive survey review using field research methods through interviews. Researcher had approached four counsellors and three class teachers from SMPKV and got their feedback on employability among school leavers from their respective schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain more in-depth input (Kallio et al., 2016). All four counsellors were the one who administers and keep-track of alumni employability details which were provided by the class teacher and they have been selected as sample based on purposeful sampling. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Sex	Post
S1	Female	Counsellor
S2	Female	Counsellor
S3	Female	Counsellor
S4	Male	Counsellor
S5	Female	Class Teacher
S6	Female	Class Teacher
S7	Male	Class Teacher

Researcher have taken consideration on ethical issues such as confidentiality of the data and anonymity of participants. Therefore, safety and confidentiality of the respondents are protected at all time. All respondents are given nicknames to represent them in writing and encoding in this article. Respondents also clearly understood that they are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving any explanation.

Findings and Discussion

SEN students who graduate from the vocational school will receive the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) issued by Department Skill Development. The certification is recognized by the industry in Malaysia and its produced fully trained skilled workers. Besides that, the certificate provides a career path and self-development as well as producing trained skill

workers that are highly demanded in the local and international market. However, a major issue that has been rooted among SEN is lack of focus at work and poor job matching (Seva, 2020). Job matching among SMPKV school leavers has been a long unsolved issue. The ministry through SMPKV have prepared various courses match to current demand and offered the spot to the most eligible and suitable students based on interview conducted. However, the issue is still revolving and has become a lost for the country and current market. Parents have a trust issue and let their insecurities stops their children future. Two to three years of training in SMPKV should have given SEN enough time to be prepared to face the real world and be in the workforce just like their peers.

The process of employment involves matching the demand to supply available in the market or in other words finding the potential employees with suitable job vacancies. The study of the employability among vocational school leavers was first carried out by Yusof et al., (2014) found that vocational special education secondary school leavers did not work in the areas of specialization that they have acquired in school. The employability rate of these graduates reaches 70% but sadly most of them were not hired based on the skill they have learned in vocational school. Students with disabilities have the freedom to choose a job based on their qualification, however it should be noted that the vocational schools aim to prepare students with specific skill so they can find jobs that match their skills, abilities and their capacity in the workforce. It is proven that a person who has a job matches their skills shows a better performance at work (Bhat, 2014). Employers on the other hand often have pessimistic views about the ability to work among SEN and cause lower participation rates and underemployment of persons with disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Public Service Department Malaysia, Social Welfare Department and many other local government agencies has been working together towards assisting PWD to find job that is matching to their ability and skill as well as conduct a counselling sessions to find the job that match to them (Hazlin Falina et al., 2015).

RQ1: How much is the understanding of job matching in skill-based employment among SEN graduated from vocational special education secondary schools?

Access to Vocational Special Education Secondary Schools

Every year Special Education Division received a huge number of applications from SEN to join SMPKV. These students were first selected by their teacher and they will sit for an entry exam to ensure that they are able to master basic knowledge of writing, reading and calculating. This process is to ensure the students who is entitle to join SMPKV is mentally and physically suitable with the course offered and should able to complete their SKM in two or maximum of three years. Once they completed their studies in SMPKV, they will soon receive a SKM issued by Department Skill Development which will allow them to work in their respective fields of expertise.

"... Majority of the school leavers did not work based on their qualifications. They join vocational school because they want to be in vocational schools only..." (S1)

"... Vocational schools were meant for a highly function students who can manage themselves and be able to be independent. However, these students are SEN, hence they need someone to explain to them what they want to do in their future..." (S2)

"... When it comes to socialization, these students are no different from mainstream students. Even though they are all SEN, the way they think just like their peers. They want to join fully residential schools and stay away from their parents..." (S4)

"... They applied to vocational schools because either their former teacher or parents want them to pursue in vocational. They themselves do not know what vocational schools can offer them at the first place..." (S5)

"... I found that SEN wants to be in vocational schools because of they want to be free from home. At most of the time, they applied because their teacher asked them to or their parents want them to have vocational certificate..." (S6)

Job Mismatch

Every year, more than 300 SEN graduated with SKM from vocational schools throughout Malaysia. However most of the job opportunity offered by the industry player are not match with the skills learned in vocational school (Yusof et al., 2014). This has become a big lost for the market as their skill trained in vocational schools are not be able to come into practice in the workforce.

"... Most of the students they did not work based on their qualifications. Either they just stay at home and not working or work on their own like doing online businesses or help their parents. Most of them loves to work with food chain company like McDonald's and KFC..."(S1)

"... The highest demand in application was desktop publishing, but the job offer in the market was very limited. Most of the job offered in the work force is from food and beverages line. However, intake for that course is limited. So, these students end up working in food and beverages line or just stay with their parents..." (S5)

"... I can say 80% out of my ex-students did not work match with their SKM or perhaps not working at all ..." (S3)

"... Most of students graduated from motorcycle servicing and maintenance, food preparation and production and ladies' dressmaking will easily get job based on their respective qualification. However, the rest of them usually struggling to find a proper job..." (S2)

Parents as Main Supporter

All parents want to see their children success in everything that they do and at the same time parent also can be the biggest enemy for these children in pursuing their dreams. Parents tends to hold a fear that their children were unable to cope with new working environment and the experiences because of their behavioural issues (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Parents should have a different perspective as their child has successfully completed a vocational training in a fully residential schools that allows them to be independent and equipped with vocational skills. Without support and trust from parents, their child will forever be an ordinary PWD.

"... Most of them just stay at home and not working. Parents don't have trust to let their child to go out and work and be independent..." (S7)

"... Some of the job match with their qualification, but the job is far from their house. Parents reluctant to let their children to travel far or to move out from their house to work..." (S3)

"...Parents are really looking into extra facilities provided by the employer such as hostel and transport. They afraid that their child might get lost or kidnap somewhere in-between. There is a student graduated in 2017, his parents only let him to work in 2021. It takes times for parents to have trust and confident in their child to live independently..." (S4)

RQ2: What is the employer concern on skill-based employment among SEN graduated vocational special education secondary schools?

Employer Awareness

PWD among the least group of people to get hired in an industry (Hazlin Falina et al., 2015). Previous studies have shown that employers often have negative attitudes towards PWD which makes it difficult for them to get job opportunities (McDonnall et al., 2015; Saidi et al., 2018). However, the reality of hiring PWD's is not totally a responsibility to help them, but rather because of the existing policies that require industry to hire and retain workers with disabilities (Araten-Bergman, 2016). The perception towards hiring PWD should have been diverted to outcome based rather than focusing more on their disability and the perception of risk.

"... Feedback from industry player saying that these students are highly skill but they need an artificial environment to ensure that they can work at their best..." (S2)

"... Employer loves our students. They are among the most loyal, determined and focus when they are at work..." (S7)

"... I have a student, he is doing motorcycle servicing and maintenance. He had his practical in a workshop at his hometown. Once he completed his study, the owner of the workshop hires him as a mechanic at his workshop. He said that this student is very loyal and punctual..." (S5)

However, we do understand that despite skills learned in vocational schools, PWD are easily exposed to health issues and difficulties adapting with the surrounding environment. Health problems may cause them to fail to remember simple instructions, unable to perform complex instructions, unable to master the basic reading, writing and counting skills, lack of communication skills and more which will affect the level of employability among PWDs (Izam et al., 2019).

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendation

SDG 1 aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere and the way to overcome the issue is to create more jobs and increase the employment for all. For PWD, in order to place

themselves in the mainstream workforce, they have to work an extra mile and give their best to impress the employer. Therefore, employer can play a role by investing reasonable accommodation to provide access to PWD in the workforce and at the same time this could change their life tremendously. The idea of adopting inclusion in industry is a great decision to include more PWD in the market, however huge changes have to be made in order to accommodate PWD in a mainstream setting. Changes includes (a) accessibility, (b) flexible working hours, (c) customize work duties, (d) job restructuring, (e) different location of job, and (f) provision of equipment for a disabled person. The accommodations are intended to assist PWD by providing equal access and do not fundamentally alter the nature of the material or environment. However, on the positive side, employing PWD can improve a company's corporate profile and customer perspective as well as can improve overall productivity among employees. On the other hand, parents nowadays should have a change in the way of seeing their child potential. Those kids are now an all grown up teenagers that is fully occupied with skills and able to be independent. They are now ready to go out and fill up the spots in the industry by using their own qualifications. Due to their behavioral issues and challenges in adapting with new environment the future of their child is wasted. Parents generally have a strong desire and hope that their children can be independent, however, they don't have high expectations for this to happen.

This study provides implication for the Ministry of Education, literature reviews as well as other stakeholders. PWD comply with the requirements set by the industry player. Therefore, this situation contributed to both parties in a win-win situation. On the other hand, industry player will have a supply of workers among PWD who have various abilities and skills. Academically, as this study adapting qualitative approach, this has given more perspectives for future researcher to have a different point of PWD's employability.

Generally, vocational special education secondary school leavers should have given more attention in a workforce. In years to come, there will be more and more school leavers occupied with skill certificate as MOE keeps on expanding their intake and the market should be ready with the pool of candidates. The government has to ensure sufficient job vacancies so that these people are not wasted and unemployed. Therefore, the inclusive approach in the industry could help PWD to have a quality life and better economy. The only way to free from poverty and reduce the rate unemployment is to give the opportunity for us to blend in with PWD and take them as part of our community.

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