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# PREPARING FOR BETTER EMPLOYABILITY POST-SECONDARY TRANSITION TO EMPLOYMENT TRAINING PROGRAM FOR ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract**

Individuals with Autism repeatedly face significant challenges to obtaining and securing meaningful employment. Transition to Employment Training Scheme and Supported employment appear to be a vital pathway to promote employment outcomes, yet there remains limited knowledge about the real-life experiences of those involved in such transition training program. Ineffective and improper transition planning and programming for post-secondary youth with Special Needs, as well as a weak partnership between special education schools, community agencies, and employers, are contributing causes of low employment rates and employment suitability, which are primarily a global phenomenon.This study is the first to take a multi-informant approach to examine employment transition programme that provides pre-employment training and job placement support for adults with autism to achieve sustainable white-collar and professional employment in Malaysia. Trainees, trainers and their job coaches were consulted in semi-structured interviews to describe their experiences in the transition to employment internship programme, focusing especially on their expectations before the start of the program and the achievements and difficulties they have experienced towards the end of the program. The majority of the key players who participated had pleasant, meaningful experiences, although some trainees experienced difficulty evaluating their employment goals, and experienced challenges in adhering to office norms. The current findings add to a better understanding of individuals with autism transitioning to employment experiences and should better guide the development of future programmes targeted at promoting employment opportunities for them.

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## 1. Introduction

Obtaining or maintaining employment is not an easy pursuit for many people, especially those with autism spectrum conditions. Not only that, the period and point of transition from youth to adulthood can be quite challenging for many regardless of ability. One of the biggest challenges for a person with ASD is in fact the transitioning from secondary education to post-secondary education or competitive employment (Griffith et al., 2016; Schmoker, 2014; Alverson et al., 2015).

The challenges of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is unfortunately persistent and one that frequently leads to significant behavioural, communication, and social challenges which causes a lifetime adjustment to their needs and supports (World Health Organization, 2017). In fact, these symptoms have often been found to complicate their ability to manage life work transitions as well as obtaining and maintaining employment. In Malaysia, the majority of young Malaysian people with learning disabilities worked in low-paid unskilled positions and earned less than the national minimum wage, with 8% earning less than RM500 (Harun et al., 2019).

As a result, they are susceptible to dependent living. The few of adults with autism who are employed, are all too often in jobs that are conceived unsuitable: either inconsistent with their skill set and abilities or for which they are underemployed (Baldwin et al., 2014). Additionally, the employability of vocational school graduates with learning disabilities in Malaysia has reached over 70%, but 45 percent of them do not acquire jobs based on the skills they learned in school. This means that, while vocational school leavers with learning difficulties have a high employment rate, it does not commensurate with their skill set and potential (Mohamed Yusof et al., 2013). Contributing causes of these low employment rates and employment suitability which are predominantly a global phenomenon include inefficient and improper transition planning and programming for post-secondary youth with ASD along with weak partnership between special education schools, community agencies and employers (Griffith et al., 2016). According to Westbrook et al. (2014), many countries like the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada have long identified the importance of transition program. This include secondary transition planning where in the United States, the mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 is known to 'prepare students for further education, employment and independent living'.

Malaysia has yet to impose a legislation that mandates transition services for all students with special needs. However according to Malaysian Plan of Action for People with Disabilities (2016-2022) the quality and effectiveness and the numbers of employment support services and their trainers should be improved and increased so that it will enable people with special needs to have better transition towards obtaining and maintaining employment. Lack of knowledge about these experiences is currently a prominent barrier for organisations considering an initiative to employ individuals with autism (Khayatzadeh-Mahani et al., 2019).

**Literature Review**
It is challenging for people with ASD to go directly into the employment world because they have difficulty understanding social context "like analysing a situation and identifying necessary and unnecessary information" (The Star 2018). Wong et al. (2018) also reiterated that, despite some

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high functioning individuals with ASD who are able to express themselves with good vocabulary, many of them have complications in the area of communication and social skills thus finding it difficult to explain themselves, express their feelings, wants and needs to other people. As a result, they get apprehensive of the situation and often shut down. In some worse cases may also fall into depression. Although a lot of previous research has shown that transition period is important, there is limited research on what programmes and interventions produces the best employment outcomes for students with ASD.

The conceptual framework utilised in this study derives from Kohler's (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming theory. This theory has expanded over the years into its prime form which is now known as Kohler's et al. (2016) Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0: A model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs. Kohler (1996) transition systems theory demonstrated that when educators, families, students, and community members and organizations work together to enforce a broad context of transition planning, the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities improve. This concept exhibits "transition planning" as a significant basis of education that guides students transition from high school to real life affairs such as further education, employment and independent living which also importantly takes into account the students' strengths, concerns, preferences and family values (Kohler et al. 2016). Transition service on the other hand according to Kohler et al. (2003) is an ongoing, multi- component process where the service is transferred through a range of instructional and transition approaches and services that caters around the local context and the student's support needs

## Aspects of Transition for Individuals with Special Needs

There seems to be a general consensus among researchers as to what transition is for students with special needs. It is multiple stages of movement to adulthood and independent life which involves completing school, starting higher education or gaining employment, establishing social relationships and getting involved with the community (Fung & Lan, 2017; Hendricks, 2010; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Furthermore, according to The Individuals for Disabilities Education Act IDEA (2004), transition is a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. These transition activities should be based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests (Kohler et al., 2016) Generally, individuals with disabilities go through various stages of transitions throughout their time in school: from early intervention services to preschool, from preschool to middle school and high school and finally from high school to postsecondary education or employment. This final transitional phase is known as secondary transition. Secondary transition is a phase where students enrol into services or programs that prepare them for post-secondary education, training or employment.

## ASD Employment Programs

The need to focus on the pathway towards employment, and employment as an outcome for young people with ASD has been noted by several studies (Anderson et al. 2018; Scott 2015 et al.; Mason et al. 2018; Hiller 2014) While career guidance,

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work experience during school and vocational assessment by schools and related agencies prove to be useful to match the specific interest, personality traits and competencies to harness their skills towards reaching their employment goals (Blair et al. 2013; Wong 2018; Bajorek et al. 2016) discussions, advice on suitable career and job skill training in school and vocational school on suitable employment may only be options and a part of a pathway for them to be ready for real life work experience. Support services such as apprenticeships, traineeships and, for some young people with ASD, supported internships within an organisation are an effective way of levelling the pathway from school to real life work experience and ultimately provide them the opportunity to be in the labour market (Bajorek et al. 2016).

**Supported Internship**
The term 'internship' opens to broad interpretation. It is a program that can be offered to high school, college or university students, medical students or post-secondary students. According to Dudley (2015) internships are a way to acquire on-the-job training for white-collar and professional careers and are identical to apprenticeships and vocational jobs. The internship positions are usually for a limited period of time and may be paid or unpaid and unlike a trainee program, employment upon internship completion is not guaranteed. For individuals with special needs particularly with ASD, supported internship provide continued pathway to develop employability and specialised job skills to help them transition better to work environment. Supported internships are more personalised than a typical traineeship as it provides customised support in their program to help develop skills in the workplace that are challenging for them. On top of that, the presence of a job coach in the internship program provides them

with non-work-related assistance (Bajorek et al. 2016). In the UK, Allott et al. (2016) reported that, Mencap an organisation that approaches a number of colleges and local authorities to consider supported internships found that many employers are uninformed of supported internships as a reliable model of good practice. Most perceive it to be identical to unpaid work experience thus cautious to be associated with a programme which might induce negative perception or criticism by the public. Moreover, despite some employers who were willing to hire students at the end of the course, claimed that provision of supported internships have arrived at a 'saturation point' after a number of years which means they are unable to offer sufficient vacancies. As a result, the supported internship loses its value. Allot, S (2016) emphasized that if more employers were aware of the advantages of supported internships and were willing to support them, saturation issue can be reduced. A recent study that examined the experiences of eight graduates with autism at London offices of Deutsche Bank on a three-month work placement internship (Remington et al. 2018) found that the interns expressed a sense of confidence in their behaviour and reported feeling accepted and determined to contribute better to their teams. Managers and other staff described having increased in awareness regarding autism and workplace diversity. According to Remington et al. (2018), the course of the internship however according to the interns, was not without its challenges. The participants collectively agreed a number of difficulties that they encountered throughout the period of the internship such as anxiety, difficulties in communication and confusion at the workplace. Researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the interns and the hiring managers before the commencement of the program and upon completion of the program to determine their anticipations,

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expectations and concerns for the upcoming program. Upon completion of the 3-month internship period they were interviewed again including buddies and team members to determine their overall experiences during the course. The two point interview managed to gain an overall perspective on the experiences of all the key players and the key findings can be an informative and useful tool to accommodate individuals with autism, to discover their hidden skills and talents and to guide other organisations and firms that wish to take upon this initiative.

**Supported Employment**

According to Gibson, C (2013) there are two pathways to supported employment. First, its the 'train then place' model; a traditional model (Frederick et al. 2019) which is usually in a sheltered environment and second, which is a more popular implementation begins with finding competitive employment then providing them with the necessary training and support in the open workplace (Gibson, C 2013; Frederick et al. 2013; Jenaro et al. 2002) There is also a third category of employment support according to Gibson (2013) which still providing support and training necessary in an open work environment but on a time limited placement plan such as an internship or apprenticeship that gives autonomy to the special needs individuals and the employers to decide if they want to hire or be hired in that particular job. According to Hanson et al (2017) supported employment is a model that centralises on job coaching. In Malaysia, job coaches are the intermediary support personnel's between individuals with special needs and the employers that provide pre-employment preparation such as interview skills, interest assessments and finding appropriate workplace to the follow-up stage during the employment where the focus shifts to the trainees adaptability, safety and their general wellbeing (Job

Coach Network Malaysia; Social Welfare Department Malaysia 2016). As reiterated by Hanson, training individuals in sheltered environment such as training centres do not reflect real life work environment and also different workplaces acquire different work task and social culture. Thus, transferring and generalising job skills from a sheltered environment to a real-life work experience can be challenging for individuals with special needs particularly individual with ASD (Frederick et al. 2019; Hanson et al. 2017; Gibson et al. 2013). A study conducted on a job-site training of supported workers with Autism revealed that one of the benefits of training individuals with Autism on the job is the opportunity to combine it with simulation training and the result showed a more rapid acquisition of job skills (Lattimore et al. 2006) Another similar study that combined supported employment with social skills intervention program was found to be highly satisfactory for adults with autism as they reported improvements in confidence and mood in terms of building their social relationships with other colleagues ( Baker-Ericzen et al. 2017).

In the UK, Project ABLE (Autism: Building Links to Employment) was conducted to examine if the Supported Employment model could be used to meet the employment goals of young people and adults with both high functioning and severe learning disabilities. It adopted an individualised approach of job matching using the Supported Employment model as mediation. According to Lynas, L (2014) over one hundred work placements encompassing all vocational areas were formed with employers throughout Belfast. There were 72 participants who took part in Project ABLE where more than half of the participants had undergone more than one work placement. Using an action research approach over a period of 4 years 56% of the adult group gained full time and

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part time employment in a variety of sectors. The overall impact has been reported as positive by the participants not only in developing employability skills but also communication, social skills and their overall independence. Based on her study Lynas, L (2014) concluded that the supported employment model can be used as an effective approach to help people with ASD achieve better experience in preparing for and entering the world of employment. In Malaysia, a study was initiated to produce significant insights into the experiences of employees with learning difficulties through supported employment scheme in a mainstream retail industry. 82 participants were engaged in the scheme including seven managers, eight government officials and three NGO personnel to determine their perspectives on the development of policy and practice relating to the implementation of supported employment. According to Wan Ardinawati (2013) the viewpoint of the participants in this study revealed that they experience a sense of recognition and achievement to be included with non-disabled employees in an open workspace and appreciated the opportunity to socially interact with them. However, unlike Project ABLE that adopted an individualised approach that centred on job matching, respondents in this supported employment scheme revealed that they were not given the decision to consider their interest in a particular job therefore they felt they have less control over their future lives. Moreover, even though the policy on 'buddy system' strengthen their self-belief in their ability to perform job tasks, the disabled tag identification policy given to them undermined their self-determination in breaking down barriers that segregated them with other employees. This is agreed by 28 respondents from a total of 40 respondents. They explained that most of the employers were unfamiliar with and insensitive to, the needs of their workers with disabilities.

## 2. Method and Study Area

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of the key individuals involved in the transition to employment internship programme, focusing especially on their expectations before the start of the program and the achievements and difficulties they have experienced towards the end of the program. To accomplish this purpose, the perspectives of the key individuals which are the trainees, the hiring managers and the support teams (trainers and mentors who work alongside the interns) on how the transition to employment training program influences the preparedness of theses trainees for employment. Three groups of individuals are invited to participate in this study. The participants for this study consist of 3 trainees with autism, 2 hiring managers and 4 support team members who are job coaches and mentors for the interns. Participant selection of the interns for this study are recruited through the program hiring managers based on their eligibility criteria which requires them to have an official autism diagnosis or medical report from a registered psychologist/ psychiatrist, has completed secondary or higher secondary education and is 21 years of age or above. Inclusion criteria for this study's participant will include diversity in race, gender, age, qualification and experience. Before the training began, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with trainees and job coaches, asking about their hopes and expectations for the upcoming training program and any concerns they might have. Subsequently, in the final week of the training program, the same trainees and the job coaches again were interviewed again to share their experiences of the three-month training period. The following research questions guide the development of the interview questionnaire; a) what are the expectations and perceptions of the trainees and job coaches before the start of the training program, b) how do the

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trainees and the job coaches describe outcomes and challenges they experience in the end of the training program, c) what do hiring managers and job coaches believe about how the employment to transition training program influences the preparedness of the trainees with ASD for employment opportunities?

## 3. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis identified the following themes from the trainees interview data before the training to employment begins: (1) desite to work; (2) cautiously hopeful; (3) awareness of strength and weaknesses; (4) family and work support and the thematic analysis identified from the trainees interview data shortly before the the training program ended: (1) purposeful experience; (2) coping with change; (3) receivin support; (4) employment hopes. These themes and incorporated subthemes (Table 3 & 4) are set out in the following section.

Table 3. Themes and sub themes from pre-employment training (Trainees)

| Themes | Sub themes |
|---|---|
| **Desire to Work** | 'I think the job that I am going to do will help me learn about myself"<br>'I need a job that can give me consistent salary' |
| **Cautiously Hopeful** | 'A part of me say, I don't know a lot about the system; how I am going to do. I cannot imagine'<br>'I still don't know if the skills I am learning here like self-development and soft skill will help me with my life choices'<br>'I am scared that if people know about my Autism I will be rejected' |
| **Awareness of strength and weaknesses** | 'I'm good at learning things fast. I am a punctual person too, but I don't like to wear formal clothes. I prefer to get a job that wears something more casual'<br>'A challenge might be building relationship with my colleagues. Some people can be talkative. I cannot catch up, but I will try to get along, slowly'<br>'My IT knowledge is not that great. I worry about not getting a job in the end. I think I can be a bit lazy working from 9 to 5, but I want to have experience. I'm hoping to learn more computing skill like Excel' |
| **Family and work support** | 'I feel EA job coaches are my biggest support right now. They are supportive unlike my parents who like to question me why I do, or I don't do certain things'<br>'My parents recognize my strength and hard work. I hope in the future I can improve my relationship with people, be more connected, also improve my relationship with my mum. She can be a little bit oppressive' |

Source: Interview transcript from Enabling Academy Trainees

Table 4. Themes and sub themes from post-employment training (Trainees)

| Themes | Sub themes |
|---|---|

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| | |
|---|---|
| **Purposeful experience** | 'I did learn quite a lot, I learn how to manage my time, how to use a planner, how to manage my money, how to manage my anger, how to control our emotion, a lot of things. One thing the most useful I learn is particularly how do I fit in socially" <br> 'I did learn use Excel, MS words and PowerPoint, how to insert image in PPT, MS words, Excel. Before, doing data entry takes a lot of time, now I know how to copy and paste numbers faster' <br> 'I have learned about friendship, I have learned to be talkative in conversation, you grow, this helps u grow in friendship. I learned more about people's personality and behaviour' |
| **Coping with Change** | 'I'm the kind of person who can work with people I don't like because u need to learn how to be with difficult team member because in life u cannot be picky in terms of team members. One of my job coaches assign me to another team member that I don't work well with, but I think it's fair because they want to push me to work with different people' <br> 'Working from home challenges me to be more committed because you can do whatever you want and you tend to forget what you need to do' |
| **Receiving support** | 'I received a lot of guidance from the job coaches, no difficulty asking job coaches for help if there is issue. My family haven't discussed with me anything about job in the future yet' <br> 'If I don't know what to do, I will look up online first, when I cannot find what I'm looking for I will ask for help, support is given enough to me' |
| **Employment Hopes** | 'I still wish I can do what I like, like bakery but office admin or corporate companies, I'm okay with both' <br> 'I can see myself working in an office environment. I can start in a low position first' |

Source: Interview transcript from Enabling Academy Trainees

## 4. Results and Discussion

Expectations and perceptions of the trainees and job coaches before the commencement of the training program Within participant viewpoints, the subject of family involvement surfaced. Families were recognised as being active in the early stages of transition to employment process (during application and interview process before joining the academy) by participants, although they may not always feel equipped to give full support to the trainees during their transition training in the academy. This, according to the participants, might be due to lack of participation and interest in following through with the participants' experiences in the training program and placing more concern on the participants' and job coaches' success of securing a job after the training program. Information sharing and follow through between trainees' parents and their job coaches on the trainees' growth and challenges during the training program were not disclosed by the job coaches in the interview, hence showed an unwillingness or lack of concern on the parents' part to collaborate with the job coaches in advocating their child's employment interests and hopes. The educational options such as life, social,

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emotional and employment skills provided for the trainees in the transition training program, as well as the efforts made to assist transition, fall under the category of Student Development (Kohler,1996). Participants expressed their thoughts on how skill development growth was both a strength and a difficulty in the process. Trainees highlighted that they received training particularly in self-management and collaborative abilities, in order to boost their confidence before entering the workforce. Additionally, trainees were given tasks and attend meetings that simulate real-life situations that take place in the workplace. Through these work simulation activities, they learned to apply skills that are beneficial: listening to the viewpoints of others, delegating responsibilities, collaborating in teams. These practices provide pathways for adults with ASD to learn to contribute and work toward common objectives which are skills that are important in the workplace. The positive results of the transition to employment training program for trainees with Autism (elevated confidence, skill development and internship employment with partner companies) are borne out by the limited amount of existing literature on these topics in Malaysia. It has been indicated that the outcomes of competitive or supportive employment are far more prevailing to sheltered workshops or other day vocational services in terms of financial earnings, broader social assimilation, and worker satisfaction (Wehman et al. 2020). Similarly, the anticipated benefits communicated by job coaches – both to them personally and to the organisation as a whole – are in pursuant to prior research. Collaboration between employment transition training centres with partnered companies, companies offering access to jobs, and companies training people with disabilities for the workplace has been identified as a significant evidence-based component in generating employment prospects from

Kohler's taxonomy transition programming 2.0 (2017) to the present. Companies have frequently remarked on the loyalty, honesty, and dependability of employees with Autism (Scott et al. 2017), and have ranked adults in the Autism spectrum as well qualified workers who can be trained to be exceptional (Andrew et al. 2015).

The trainees, and the job coaches' depiction of the outcomes and obstacles, they experience at the end of the training program.

The trainees' increased confidence and perceived self-efficacy was one significant example noticed by some of the trainees themselves and their job coaches. This factor is hardly mentioned in previous research in Malaysia, despite the fact that it has the potential to have a significant influence on employment outcome. One recent study by Martinet al. (2019) revealed that adults with ASD have a high probability in securing employment once adequate transition training are in place, hence helping them develop their employability skills could be considered as a worthwhile contribution to the economy and society as a whole. Though several positive outcomes were revealed, the training process was not necessarily without challenges for all involved. Some of the barriers marked by the trainees in the training program fall under the key attributes of autism, namely self-regulation difficulties. Individuals with ASD are known for their rigid, inflexible thinking (Pratt et al. 2017). This resonates with job coaches views that, lack of work readiness and adhering to office rules and regulations were likely contributed to these area of particular difficulty, especially with respect to the way in which some trainees described their fixated interest that are not work related and unable to articulate their employment hopes in the future. These experiences accentuated the importance of laying out precise expectations about the

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programme's direction from the outset because it is crucial that the trainees understand that the work, they are going to embark in fits their interest, abilities and sense of purpose. Some adults with autism know explicitly what type of work they want to do. Others are adaptable, and some others have no clue. Like everyone else, adults under the spectrum have the obligations and the right to lead their own lives. Consistent with this, previous research has noted that choice-making is a significant element that has been linked to job status and may be targeted for interventions to improve employability (Bush & Tasse 2017). Communication and socialising with colleagues are additional areas that were identified as fairly challenging for some of the trainees and observed by the job coaches. The social or communal experiences of people with ASD differ widely. Some trainees have exhibited no apparent difficulties socializing but may have an honest need to have time alone to reconvene or regather their energy after a conversation. Furthermore, these differences between the trainees were apparent in this study. For example, some trainees preferred to acknowledge their autism diagnosis to colleagues in their future employment, while one other trainee did not. Similarly, one felt anxious about the social aspects of his role in workplace, while others consider networking opportunities and enjoyed spending time with colleagues in the academy. The presence of one-on-one session between job coaches and their trainees to discuss work or issues with sensitivity were determined to be helpful in communicating their expectation and weaknesses when problems or issues arise. According to the job coaches, understanding how to pull in trainees and their assigned job coaches together to discuss performance and issues would be a vital step towards building an effective environment in supporting trainees strength and weaknesses within an

organisation. The need for individualised support was reiterated by several job coaches who highlighted the importance of determining trainees work readiness in their behaviour and mindset in order to achieve better employment outcomes. This is in line with a study that demonstrated the significance of customised employment where autistic employees' key performance of their strength and weaknesses are are compatible with their job description (Wehman et al 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

In fulfilling United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for providing quality education, decent work and reducing inequalities for all, Yayasan Gamuda, Enabling Academy Transition to Employment Training Programme has shown a very promising strategy to overcome and reduce the exclusion of individuals with Autism from the job market. Their pioneering initiative in establishing Malaysia's first Transition to Employment Training Program highlights the importance of supported employment and on-the-job coaching and training. The findings in this study identifies with Kohler, P (2016) model for planning and organising Transition Education, Services, and Programs. The EA program's strength lies in its student development and interagency collaboration practices which emphasises life, employment and soft skill development and their strategies to foster collaboration with their partner companies in creating an inclusive workplace. The Enabling Academy ETP could well become a role-model for good practice for other organisations that intend to establish a similar transition to employment training program across all disabilities and also for employers across Malaysia.

## 6. References

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