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EMPOWERING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY (PWD) THROUGH A SKILLS INTERVENTION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

People with disability (PWD) are a unique group who possess special virtuosity. Through employers' feedback from a survey that was conducted, a skill intervention program was designed and conducted by employing a reskilling and upskilling module that was aligned to employers' job requirements among selected PWDs at the Putra Future Classroom (PFC), Universiti Putra Malaysia. Prior to the program, an ethical approval form was sent and approved by the ethics board of the university, and selected employers were asked to respond to a quantitative survey to obtain their insights on employability skills traits necessary for today's job market. In the program, the group of PWDs spent three days with employability skill trainers and certified image consultants. A single case study semi-structured interview session was then conducted with the PWDs after the program to gather their personal experiences. In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with 30 students who were selected through purposive sampling. This was done through validated and established open-ended questions that were asked asynchronously via the WhatsApp instant messaging application as physical interview sessions were not feasible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The text and audio responses were recorded and transcribed using the Atlas.ti software. Constant comparative analysis was employed through the use of the color-coded technique to develop the themes. The process of triangulation involved module, fieldnotes, and observation prior, during, and after the project completion. Based on the findings, it was found that PWDs do well in employment, highlighting the importance of reviewing the plethora of skeptical beliefs given the fact that employability skills are intrinsic values that involve non-technical and less physical functions. The process of integrating PWDs in the workforce is thus crucial to ensure that no one is left behind and that the country's wealth and prosperity are not compromised.

Keywords: Employability skills, People with Disability, Intrinsic values

1. Introduction

Today, blatant treatment is given to People with Disability (PWDs); as a result, relatively, many PWDs fall into poverty and are isolated from the public (Fox & Marini, 2012). In many cases, PWDs are neglected by the community due to skeptical beliefs, which often lead to learned helplessness. Consequently, some governments have initiated plans to ensure the welfare of PWDs (Hauben et al., 2012). One of this is to ensure that the opportunity to join the workforce is possible for PWDs. However, combating the issue of unemployment among PWDs is complicated. Although the government has implemented various policies on unemployment among PWDs, it is often implemented ineffectively.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on PWDs employment. In particular, the negative connotation of hiring PWDs into employment has been noted. However, contrary to the skepticism that exist among the public, there are numerous benefits to employ PWDs. For example, hiring PWDs can lead to improvements in profitability (i.e, profits and cost-effectiveness, turnover and retention, reliability and punctuality, employee loyalty, company image), competitive advantage (i.e., diverse customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction, innovation, productivity, work ethic, safety), inclusive work culture, and ability awareness (Lindsay et al., 2018). In addition, the livelihoods of PWDs can be improved based on a steady income, enhanced self-confidence, expanded social network, and a sense of community. Hemphill and Kulik (2016) claimed that when PWDs experience greater contact with employers, positive interactions and rapport can prosper. This condition ultimately encourages PWDs to strive harder and appreciate their occupation more. In responding to the need for improved employability for PWDs, this research seeks to explore the employability skills that were acquired after an intervention training offered to PWDs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Issues of PWDs' Employability

The struggle of PWDs can be observed worldwide. PWDs are inundated with judgmental views regarding their capacity and ability to work. They also struggle to place themselves in specific jobs. According to Bonaccio et al. (2019), around 40.7% of PWDs are underrepresented in 16 out of 20 rapidly growing occupations that include both management and technical jobs even though they make up 20% of the world's population (Hemphill & Kulik, 2016). In one study, one in 12 Australians with some form of disability were found to perceive numerous forms of discrimination and unfair treatment due to their condition (Hemphill & Kulik, 2016). Many of them suffer from unequal benefits and salary increments compared to their

non-disabled colleagues and experience dismissive treatment among other employees. Hence, to support PWDs' employment, it is imperative to provide work-based experience, vocational training, accessibility to higher education institutions, career exploration, effective support services for employment, and post-employment services (Jang, Wang, & Lin, 2014) among others.

From a global perspective, the employment rates for PWDs are disheartening; for instance, in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the range is between 9% and 28%. The rates of unemployed PWDs are disheartening as studies have shown that an overwhelming majority of unemployed PWDs indicated that they preferred to work (Bureau of National Affairs, 2000; Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2012; Sofer, Tal-Katz & Rimmerman, 2011; Duvdevany, Or-Chen, & Fine, 2016).

Negative connotations and prejudices have produced adverse effects for PWDs in their enjoyment of life. To make matters worse, PWDs have been disregarded for their opportunity to gain employment (Erickson, Lee, & Von Schrader, 2017; Moore, McDonald, & Bartlett, 2018; Vornholt et al., 2018), hence, many PWDs suffer from poverty and struggle to lead their lives. Inequality in receiving equal treatment in getting job opportunities is also evident, with the opportunities available being severely limited. Employers, in addition, have also developed pessimistic perceptions of PWDs.

2.2. Global Action for PWDs' Employment

The empowerment and employability of PWDs has claimed the attention of the United Nations members through the worldwide sustainability agenda. In the Sustainable Development Goals indicator, disabilities are specifically mentioned in Goal 4, 8, 10, 11, and 17, where Goals 8 and 10 relate to employment for those with disabilities (United Nations, n.d). However, the theme during the Autism Awareness Day 2021 proved that employability for PWDs is still an existing issue.

In Malaysia, the government has introduced the National Social Policy in 2003 that emphasizes equality, rights, and the participation of PWDs in society. The policy was revised in circular no. 3 in 2008-2009 with the implementation of the 1% percent policy of job placement among PWDs in the government sector. This policy is a huge leap on execution to advocate PWD's employment from the typical welfare and social services policy that is granted to marginalized and isolated PWDs in Malaysia. As Islam (2015) mentioned, the optimistic efforts by having such policy and ruling were to ensure that PWDs enjoy equal rights and can fully participate within the Malaysian society. Overall, the objectives of the national welfare program were projected to secure and stabilize society to live harmoniously without jeopardizing human rights that include PWDs.

2.3. Unemployment Among PWDs

There exist numerous issues related to unemployment among PWDs. As a result, the stability of PWDs' lives and care of the society is often discouraging. Upon entering employment, PWDs often suffer from a myriad of prejudices and maltreatment from employers. Often, they are neglected and do not receive fair treatment due to their deficiency. Hence, initiatives and measures have been strategized by the government to solve issues of unemployment among PWDs. This marginalized group endures a vicissitude of judgmental perceptions, isolation, and ill-treatment due to their deficiencies, which calls for the need for further study of PWDs' employment to obtain a clearer picture of the situation.

PWDs often struggle to place themselves in jobs as employers have negative perceptions on their capacity and capabilities to fulfill specific responsibilities. Job applicants among PWDs encounter less interest among employers, even though some may have had relevant work experience (Ameri et al., 2018). PWDs have been reported to make proactive attempts to secure themselves in employment by engaging in job preparation and job-seeking activities despite discerned discriminations as they feel motivated to confront the barriers (Sundar et al., 2018). Yet, despite their ongoing efforts to place themselves in employment, they are frequently marginalized due to their shortcomings. Most of them are also less likely to enter the workforce as they perceived less interest and a negative first impression among employers.

On top of the belligerent attitudes towards PWDs, research has reported that employers also neglect PWDs who possess significant work experiences (Ameri et al., 2018). The finding was a refutation to the strategies and initiatives of the government and training institutions to empower PWDs with the necessary qualifications and skills to facilitate successful labor market placement. Ameri et al. (2018) expounded upon employers' concerns that hiring PWDs would risk their organization due to assumed absenteeism, productivity, health, insurance costs, or customer or coworker reactions towards PWDs.

With regard to the privilege to possess a job, PWDs often encounter persistent barriers at work (Raymond et al., 2019). In addition, successful PWDs who have stable careers are also not exempt from encountering contentious experiences in socializing with their colleagues. This calls for an imperative need to integrate PWDs with the workforce ecosystem and to treat them as normal human beings. This notion was supported by Sundar et al. (2018) who posited that efforts to improve work-related self-efficacy and confidence among PWDs are necessary, with focus needing to be given primarily on coping mechanisms with the job environment. This is because the motivation to remain in the workforce is also a major challenge to some PWDs (Zyskowski et al., 2015).

A large number of demotivated PWDs end in poverty. Zyskowski et al. (2015) established that crowd work, which is a job that practices more collaborative effort, could encourage the generation of opportunities for PWDs that promise job flexibility and strong support systems. Once PWDs earn these benefits, they would then appreciate their association with the job and the responsibilities they have. Other concerns related to the flexibility of employment among PWDs have also been discussed in past research. For example, Pagán-Rodríguez (2009) believed that self-employment opportunities offer flexibility and better adjustment for those with a disability status and working life. Moreover, the levels of satisfaction with the job, type of job, and working conditions of self-employed disabled people are higher than those reported by disabled people who are wage and salary earners. Hence, policymakers could encourage self-employment to increase the employment and secure the wellbeing of PWDs.

Past research have reported that the barriers to employment among PWDs can vary. Gewurtz, Langan, and Shand (2016), for instance, listed seven factors related to the paucity of PWDs employment: 1) regulations versus practice, 2) stigma, 3) disclosure, 4) accommodations, 5) relationship building and use of disability organizations, 6) information and support to employers, and 7) hiring practices that invite people with disabilities. Hogan et al. (2012) concurred that the workplace accommodation for PWDs is disheartening, as appropriate facilities and infrastructures for PWDs should be in place to accommodate their needs and assist them to work effectively. All the aforementioned issues are still occurring, therefore, continuous efforts must be made such as round table discussions, research, and policymaking to support the employment of PWDs.

Research on the employment of PWDs have often highlighted issues of equity and equality within employment rather than delve into the specific skills needed by employers. Some research has indicated that the problem with PWDs' unemployment is not just their incapacity to work due to technological difficulties and unfavorable employer attitudes, but also the requirement for them to integrate employability skills that are highly valued in an organization (Guichard, 2018). However, scholars have not yet come to a consensus on how to define employability skills and soft skills.

In this study, employability skills are defined as the fundamental values, beliefs, qualities, and behaviors that are relevant to the labor market (Robles, 2012). In addition to the necessity to develop employability skills, PWDs can make a significant contribution that can be strengthened through the development of soft skills, which will increase their employability as well as their inclusion within the workforce and society.

Past studies have highlighted several distinct and essential employability skills that

PWDs require. While some employability skills traits—like communication, managerial and leadership, critical thinking, and analytical skills—are highly valued in today's workforce, other skills—like self-care, resilience, and tolerance, as well as adaptability and flexibility to the demands of the workforce—will increase the likelihood that people with disabilities (PWDs) will be employed.

2.5. Justification and Potential of PWDs Employment Through Employability Skills Development

Numerous reports and research findings have proven that developing PWDs for employment is worth studying. Likewise, employability skills have been set in past research as premises in applying for jobs across numerous sectors, including for PWDs. Employability skills are defined as transferable skills that are developed through the process of education from training institutions, innate talents, or through the influence of life experience. Employability skills have also evolved within the ever-changing job landscape. Leadership, teamwork, negotiation, communication, thinking are some examples of employability skills, however, this list is not exhaustive (Omar, Bakar, & Rashid, 2012).

In reflecting on the need for employability skills as necessary traits to warrant employment, PWDs are often deprived as they lack the exposure to this type of training. Ju, Zhang, and Pacha (2012) highlighted the importance of upskilling and training of employability skills as pillars to increase the likelihood of employment for PWDs. There is a consensus among researchers that personal integrity/honesty in work, ability to follow instructions, ability to show respect for others, ability to be on time, and ability to show high regard for safety procedures are crucial employability skills (Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2012), which has also been reported in other studies on ideal employability skills for PWDs (Ju, Pacha, Moore, & Zhang, 2014). Hence, employability skills have become the premise in hiring not only employees who are non-disabled individuals, but also PWDs.

Prior to this study, intervention programs to upskill and reskill PWDs have focused on employability skills that are valued by both educators and employers for individuals with and without disabilities. Past studies have also attempted to examine the discrepancies that occur in job markets. For example, Abd Halim, Muda, and Izam (2019) examined the employability skills among students with disabilities to uncover trends in the existing workforce environment. The study reported pivotal findings where students with some form of disability lack thinking skills, computer skills, and technology skills. This underscores the importance of the current workforce, whose skills are critical due to digitalization competitiveness in the market and new technologies (IMD, 2020).

Government agencies have admitted their frustrations in their attempt to empower the opportunity of employment among PWDs. As soon as employers devise a

proactive actions to assist PWDs to obtain employment, issues abound. The necessary skills that are often reported to be absent among PWDs include technical and soft skills. Most notably, the element of employability skills is often missing among PWDs. Employability skills encompass technical and soft skills that are required to survive in the workforce. Technical skills can be defined as the ability to perform specific practical or hands-on tasks, while soft skills are skills that are performed to get hired, retain employment and progress in one's career development (Omar, Bakar, & Rashid, 2012). Surprisingly, some studies have reported that potential employees who may be considered for employment often struggle to remain employed due to lack of soft skills. Thus, PWDs must be aware of and develop these two types of skills to survive in today's challenging job market. Hence, this article seeks to explore soft skills or employability skills of PWDs who experienced a technical training program at a selected PWDs training institution. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide enlightenment on the required skills by employers and consequently improve the employment rates of PWDs in Malaysia.

In past years, the serious efforts to uplift the lives of PWDs have been sporadic. These include studies that have been conducted to determine the number of registered PWDs in databases and cross-checking their pathways after completing educational programs, which is often discussed at the parliamentary level. These efforts have been made by stakeholders at various levels, yet, an accurate figure of PWD recruitment in Malaysia still cannot be determined. In addition, scholars have yet to reach a consensus on how to define employability skills and soft skills (Robles, 2012). Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the required employability skills, a quantitative survey was conducted to determine employers' perception of hiring PWDs in industries before an employability skills development training program was conducted for the PWDs in this study. Based on the findings from the quantitative study, specific employability skills based on seven themes were identified and later executed in the training program: (1) communication skills, (2) leadership and managerial skills, (3) active learning skills, (4) self-grooming skills, (5) resilience and tolerance, (6) adaptively and flexibility, and (7) critical thinking and analytical skills. After the implementation of the intervention program, the participants were asked about the employability skills they had developed based on the outcome of the program.

3. Methodology

A case study based on the qualitative inquiry was employed in this study to explore the employability skills that the PWDs had acquired during the training program. The structured employability skills training was developed and conducted by a professional image consultant company registered in Malaysia. The module was developed by the company according to employers' feedback regarding the specific employability skills needed on hiring PWDs, which are (1) communication skills,

(2) leadership and managerial skills, (3) active learning skills, (4) self-grooming skills, (5) resilience and tolerance, (6) adaptively and flexibility, and (7) critical thinking and analytical skills. Non-governmental agencies (NGOs) who provided support to PWDs were invited; the two NGOs that were involved in this project were the Gurney Training Center from the Malaysian Society for the Blind, and PWDs Support and Services Unit at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The research participants were students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) syndrome who were enrolled in classes at UPM, as well as a group of students from skill training facilities run by the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB). After constructing the interview protocol, 21 respondents were chosen for interviews via the purposeful sampling method. The selection of respondents was done by identifying UPM Students with OKU cards from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development. The program coordinator and the researcher collaborated closely to verify the list of OKU students who met the study's eligibility requirements. From this number, 20 participants were categorized under a certain level of blindness and one participant was an ADHD patient. The program itinerary is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Itinerary of the employability skills development program for PWDs

| Date | Time | Activity | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|
| 30 September 2020 (Wednesday) | 8.30 AM - 9.00 AM | Opening Ceremony | |
| | 9.00AM - 10.30 AM | Module 1- Exploration of BETTER <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● First-class people (BETTER module) ● Be prepared (B) with VUCA ● The Employability Skills Framework | |
| | 10.30 AM - 10.45 AM | Breakfast | |
| | 10.45 AM - 1.00 PM | Module 2- Integrity Management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Building a personal integrity boundary ● Enhancing work and personal ethics (E) ● Integrity at workplace | |
| | 1.00PM - 2.30 PM | Lunch Break | |
| | 2.30 PM - 4.30 PM | Module 3- Communicate Effectively <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a trustworthy (T) environment ● Exploring personal social style ● Adapting social style to work best with others | |
| | 4.30 PM - 5.00 PM | Teatime and Dismiss | |
| | 1 October 2020 (Thursday) | 8.30 AM-10.30 AM | Module 4 - Approach to Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tactful (T) in approaching a difficult situation ● Problem-solving approach ● PDCA analysis |
| | | 10.30 AM – 10.45 AM | Breakfast |
| | | 10.45 AM – 1.00 PM | Module 5 - Continuous development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enable (E) yourself to learn new skills ● Resources needed to learn ● Practice make perfect |
| 1.00 PM - 2.30 PM | | Lunch Break | |
| 2 October 2020 (Friday) | 2.30 PM – 4.30 PM | Module 6 - Mirror yourself <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Re-evaluate (R) yourself ● Exploring opportunities ● Award yourself | |
| | 4.30 PM - 5.00 PM | Teatime and Dismiss | |
| | 8.30 AM-10.30 AM | Module 7 – Professional Image Branding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exploring style personality ● Men’s & Women’s Professional Wear | |
| | 10.30 AM – 10.45 AM | Breakfast | |
| | 10.45AM – 12.30 PM | Module 7 (Continue) | |
| | 12.30 PM - 12.45 PM | Q&A | |
| | 12.45 PM | Closing Ceremony | |

After the three-day employability skills development program, the participants were invited to a one-month focus group discussion (FGD) to share and reflect on their experiences and opinions on the training program. The participants were invited to call in, toll-free, to a group call regularly after completing the employability skills

program. The FGD sessions involved open discussions of participants' feedback both synchronously and asynchronously via structured questions using the WhatsApp instant messaging application. This was to facilitate the participants' engagement in sharing the employability skills that they had acquired during the training program. A question was posted daily in the application, and the participants could choose to give feedback in the WhatsApp group which had been created before the FGD or via private message. The feedback from the participants on the intervention program was collected through a single case study semi-structured interview session. The narratives were collected and encoded in Microsoft Excel for documentation. The Excel spreadsheet was then transferred to the Atlas.ti advanced qualitative analysis software to conduct the thematic analysis.

4. Findings

The thematic qualitative analysis was conducted using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) namely Atlas.ti (version. 9) for 10 pages of interview transcripts. The software was used to organize the data, conduct exploration and extraction of themes, and present the findings. The purpose of the interview was to determine the employability skills which the participants had acquired during the "Employability Skills Development Program for Orang Kurang Upaya (People with Disabilities) (ESDP-OKU)". The data was examined using thematic analysis. As the initial step in the qualitative data analysis process, the topic analysis involved interview transcription. Atlas.ti (version. 9) was used to classify and code the narrative's textual results. The program computed the pattern to find matching codes and improve the search accuracy in the data. To create the thematic analysis, the codes were updated. Lastly, a peer-checking and validation procedure was conducted to cross-check the specifics of the themes and meanings. Based on the analysis, a total of seven themes and 57 quotations related to employability skills were derived from the interview transcripts. The themes were (1) communication skills, (2) leadership and managerial skills, (3) active learning skills, (4) self-grooming skills, (5) resilience and tolerance, (6) adaptively and flexibility, and (7) critical thinking and analytical skills.

Specifically, from the derived quotations, 11 (19.3%) were related to communication skills, 10 (17.5%) were related to leadership and managerial skills, 10 (17.5%) were related to active learning skills, nine (15.8%) were related to self-grooming skills, six (10.5%) were related to resilience and tolerance, six (10.5%) were related to adaptivity and flexibility, and five (8.8%) were related to critical thinking and analytical skills. The following subtopics narrate the themes along with the quotations.

4.1. Communication skills

Collectively, the OKU students conveyed that they had acquired proper

communication skills during the ESDP-OKU training session. A total of 11 quotations (19.3%) related to communication skills were extracted. For instance, Informant 1 asserted that he/she had acquired the skills to communicate with individuals of different backgrounds and in various settings:

“...the skills I got were communication skills at all levels and situations.” (1:28 para(s) 19 in Informant 1)

Similarly, Informant 2 also asserted that he/she managed to learn the proper way of communicating when speaking to a higher level of personnel in an organization as well as in public:

“And also the style of language I should use when dealing with superiors, and the style of language I should use when dealing with other people.” (2:10 para(s) 13 in Informant 2)

Informant 3 also noted that during the ESDP-OKU, he/she was able to acquire proper communication skills:

“New skill that I learned while at UPM, I learned how to communicate well...” (3:8 para(s) 16 in Informant 3)

Last but not least, Informant 5 asserted that the ESDP-OKU had changed his perception especially on how to communicate with others:

“What changed my perception during the program was the way we communicate with others.” (5:9 para(s) 16 in Informant 5)

4.2. Leadership and managerial skills

The second theme related to employability skills is leadership and managerial skills. A total number of 10 quotations (17.5%) were extracted. For instance, Informant 1 conveyed that he/she managed to acquire leadership and managerial skills, especially in managing an organization during the ESDP-OKU training session:

“The skills I got were leadership skills...” (1:35 para(s) 24 in Informant 1)

“...and also the skills of managing an organization.” (1:36 para(s) 24 in Informant 1)

On the same note, Informant 2 asserted that he/she managed to acquire leadership and managerial skills, particularly in managing an organization, during the ESDP-OKU training session:

“The skills I got were leadership skills... and the skills to manage an organization.” (2:18 para(s) 19 in Informant 2)

4.3. Active learning skills

The third theme related to employability skills is active learning. A total of 10

quotations (17.5%) were extracted. For instance, Informant 1 said that he/she actively took part in the ESDP-OKU training session, especially the personality test activity. From this, he/she learned how to identify his/her strengths and weaknesses:

“During the program at UPM, I learned how to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of oneself. Like me, my advantage is... I am good at reflexes, and my strength, I am willing to try things that other people are reluctant to try.” (3:3 para(s) 10 in Informant 3)

Similarly, Informant 4 agreed that the personality test activity allowed him/her to actively rediscover him/herself:

“...the most interesting aspect was that I now perceive personality testing from a different perspective. Once the personality test is done we could better understand ourselves, even to the smallest details, it does important.” (4:8 para(s) 14 in Informant 4)

The same active involvement was also observed in Informant 5. He/she affirmed that he/she could apply all the knowledge acquired in the actual working environment:

“I feel happy because I got a lot of knowledge from this program and it can be... actually applied when I am an adult and in my career.” (5:11 para(s) 18 in Informant 5)

Lastly, similar to Informant 5, Informant 6 was also actively involved in the activities during the ESDP-OKU and agreed that all the activities were fun and he/she acquired a lot of new knowledge:

“...this program is really fun. Everything is fun, for me. I can learn a lot of new knowledge.” (6:3 para(s) 10 in Informant 6)

4.4. Self-grooming skills

The fourth theme related to employability skills is self-grooming. A total of nine quotations (15.8%) were extracted. To illustrate, Informant 1 affirmed that he/she acquired the skills on how to dress for work, especially for the public and private sectors:

“...I have knowledge about self-appearance when we work in the government sector or in the private sector, working in the office.” (1:30 para(s) 21 in Informant 1)

On the same note, Informant 2 asserted that during the ESDP-OKU training session, he/she managed to acquire skills on how to present him/herself properly for work:

“Before this, I would not know how to groom myself. But when I take part in the program, I know that whenever I enter the job market, I could prepare myself in terms of self-appearance...” (2:8 para(s) 12 in Informant 2)

Similar to Informant 1 and 2, Informant 3 also agreed that during the ESDP-OKU

training session, he/she was introduced to the skill of choosing the right dress for work, as well as the right perfume to wear for the right occasion:

"During the program at UPM for three days, I gained a lot of knowledge. For instance, I learned how to choose the appropriate attire for a job, and I learned how to choose the right perfume..." (3:1 para(s) 8 in Informant 3)

Informant 4 and 5 similarly agreed that they needed to dress properly and be presentable when working, hence the acquisition of self-grooming skills was considered important:

"Even though we are handicapped, we still need to dress neatly. Only then, we could try new things." (4:13 para(s) 20 in Informant 4)

"...self-grooming." (5:2 para(s) 8 in Informant 5)

4.5. Resilience and tolerance

The fifth theme related to employability skills is resilience and tolerance. A total of six quotations (10.5%) were extracted. To illustrate, Informant 1 asserted that the ESDP-OKU training had changed his/her paradigm toward the challenges in the working environment; they also became more resilient and tolerant:

"...But now it changes my view that I could face challenges in a workplace, especially in the government sector, and I'm confident I could do well and I could face new challenges." (1:24 para(s) 17 in Informant 1)

On the same note, Informant 2 agreed that the ESDP-OKU training had made him/her stronger especially in controlling his/her emotions:

"What I got for myself, from the program was... the strength of being able to control my emotions..." (2:6 para(s) 12 in Informant 2)

Informant 3 also affirmed that the ESDP-OKU training had managed to lift his/her confidence level and made him/her ready to face challenges and solve any predicament:

"After I joined the program that day, I was able to convince myself and uplift my spirit, especially in... dealing with problems. I could uplift my spirit and solving problems. It doesn't matter whether the problem is big or small." (3:4 para(s) 12 in Informant 3)

4.6. Adaptivity and flexibility

The sixth theme related to employability skills is adaptability and flexibility. A total of six quotations (10.5%) were extracted. Firstly, Informant 1 mentioned that he/she was able to adapt and be flexible in dealing with colleagues at work as well as with individuals in certain situations after attending the ESDP-OKU training:

"...I learned about the ways of dealing with others at work. And also dealing with

certain people in certain situations..." (1:37 para(s) 23 in Informant 1)

Similarly, Informant 2 also mentioned that he/she could adapt and be flexible in dealing with colleagues at work and deal with individuals in certain situations after attending the ESDP-OKU training:

"...the interesting thing for me is that...I learned about the ways of dealing with everyone at work, and also when dealing with certain people in certain situations." (2:47 para(s) 17 in Informant 2)

On the same note, Informant 3 mentioned that during the ESDP-OKU training, he/she was able to acquire the skills of adapting to a new environment:

"...secondly I was able to learn how to survive in new places, places I am not used to with." (3:9 para(s) 16 in Informant 3)

Similar to Informant 3, Informant 4 mentioned that during the ESDP-OKU training, he/she was able to acquire the skills of adapting to a new environment:

"...we could adapt to our surroundings." (4:11 para(s) 18 in Informant 4)

Last but not least, Informant 5 mentioned that he/she was able to adapt and be flexible in dealing with colleagues at work after attending the ESDP-OKU training:

"...at work, we will experience various challenges, various obstacles. Not just yourself but others as well. Therefore, we need to be able to adjust ourselves with the people that we are working with, and the people who will... uhh hire us." (5:5 para(s) 8 in Informant 5)

4.7. Critical thinking and analytical skills

The seventh theme related to employability skills is critical thinking and analytical skills. A total number of five quotations (8.8%) were extracted. To elucidate, Informant 3 asserted that the 'Eiffel Tower' activity during the ESDP-OKU training was challenging and required him/her to think critically and analyze the possible ways of raising the tower:

"During the program, the most interesting thing for me was that each group has to build the Eiffel Tower. I thought building the Eiffel Tower was easy but it turns out to be difficult. Just like working where... nothing comes easy. It's all hard work... hard work. That's my opinion." (3:7 para(s) 14 in Informant 3)

As for Informant 4, he/she learned to observe and determine individual personalities in a working environment:

"I guess the new skill I got was how to know the types of people when I am at work. Uhh, umm, during the program, it was stated that there are four types of temperaments or personality traits of an individual... So it is a new skill that is very

useful for uhh, we as OKU, to evaluate people and ourselves.” (4:10 para(s) 18 in Informant 4)

Informant 4 also developed his/her ability to think and analyze critically through one of the activities conducted during the ESDP-OKU training, which focused on determining several situations in a working environment:

“...as for example, the islands activities provided, we need certain skills to determine the situation that we are in. And from there maybe... it will be useful when we enter the workforce.” (4:14 para(s) 20 in Informant 4)

5. Summary of findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the employability skills acquired by OKU students during the ESDP-OKU. Overall, based on the thematic qualitative analysis, a total number of seven themes related to employability skills were derived from the interview transcripts. The themes were (1) communication skills, (2) leadership and managerial skills, (3) active learning skills, (4) self-grooming skills, (5) resilience and tolerance, (6) adaptivity and flexibility, and (7) critical thinking and analytical skills. Table 2 shows the distribution of quotations according to each theme.

Table 2. Distribution of quotation according to theme

| No. | Theme | No. of Quotatio n | Percentage (%) | Related Modules |
|--------------|---|------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Communication skills | 11 | 19.3% | 3 |
| 2 | Leadership and managerial skills | 10 | 17.5% | 2 |
| 3 | Active learning skills | 10 | 17.5% | 5 |
| 4 | Self-grooming skills | 9 | 15.8% | 7 |
| 5 | Resilience and tolerance | 6 | 10.5% | 6 |
| 6 | Adaptivity and flexibility | 6 | 10.5% | 5 |
| 7 | Critical thinking and analytical skills | 5 | 8.8% | 4 |
| Total | | 57 | 100.0% | |

6. Implications and Recommendations

PWDs’ involvement in employment has been studied over the last few decades as driven by national initiatives on creating awareness and increasing the participation of PWDs in the country. However, there has been little discussion on the execution phase of the plans that had been developed based on the established policies and documents. Rather, it can be observed that most of the attention of public and private stakeholders had been paid to the preparation of facilities and accommodation to

PWDs in the work area. As a result, the focus on talents and skills that PWDs should acquire for employability has been largely overlooked.

This study determined the specific employability skills that are highly demanded by employers not only for prospective employees who do not have any form of disability, but also skills that can lead to a positive perception among employers for those who have disabilities. Based on the qualitative analysis, this study focused on the development of employability skills among PWDs. Research on PWDs employment have often focused on equality and fairness in employment opportunities rather than explore the skills that are required by employers. This is despite the fact that skills are an important factor to be considered in securing employment. Hence, there remains a crucial question regarding the capabilities and capacities of the workforce among PWDs to perform job tasks. Despite automation and assistive technologies aiding motion and product creation, the role of PWDs in employment should not be neglected. Economic challenges, employee retrenchment, and company downsizing policies have made it particularly difficult for one to secure employment. Robles (2012) argued that technical and hard skills are no longer considered primary skills in getting access to the workforce. He added that the complexity of technological evolution due to globalization has transformed the landscape of the workforce to demand new skills for job success and talent retention within organizations.

In today's global society, the ability to adapt and cope with the new workforce ecosystem such as the gig-economy, e-commerce, and industrial revolution has led to a severe disregard for the role of PWDs. These challenges in recruiting PWDs in an organization are exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19, which has led to constant changes in the work environment. Work-from-home, for instance, has become a common practice, which in theory should be advantageous to PWDs as it makes commuting to the workplace unnecessary. Hence, as a new norm for PWDs, having an internet connection and proper technologies such as computers and mobile phones should suffice for them to perform specific tasks. However, based on past literature, the issue related to PWD unemployment is not simply due to the technical inability of the PWD to work or the negative perceptions of employers; rather, there exists a need for PWDs to also possess mainstream employability skills that are highly emphasized in an organization. Guichard (2018) highlighted that the ability to recognize opportunities, self-determination, career adaptability, employability, self-efficacy beliefs, and the ability to integrate all personal changes into life stories in a meaningful way are workforce survival 'kits' for today's employment. These skills also applicable to other employees who do not have any form of disability.

Employment trends today are becoming increasingly distressing and demanding. Despite organizations' need for employees who possess a myriad of theoretical and practical skills, the direction for job recruitment often remains elusive. Potential

employees who are resourceful, have positive attitudes, and who are proficient in specific job requirements are sometimes less attractive to some organizations. More notably, employers in the digital age yearn for outstanding employees who have multiple skills and who can be employable for different types of responsibilities. The fact is that some common jobs such as travel agents, bank tellers, and cooks may someday be replaced by automated machines and technologies (Phillpott, 2021). As the ways in which people perform a job change, employees must continue to align themselves to current trends by developing skills that are impossible for any form of technology to perform, including soft skills and employability skills.

A considerable amount of literature has been published to define employability skills. These studies have produced numerous terminologies to describe the employability skills required in the workplace. Among some examples are transferable skills (O'Neil, Allred & Baker, 1997), career skills (Smith & Krüger, 2011), and work readiness skills (Zinser, 2003) to describe the value of non-technical skills. Additionally, Omar, Bakar, and Rashid (2012) proposed employability skills as transferable skills that are consistently used in the workforce, which can be gained from knowledge and training.

Employability skills can also be developed from values and personality growth through learning and experience. Leadership, teamwork, negotiation, communication, and creative and critical thinking skills are among the employability skills that are relevant to the current work environment. While scholars have yet to reach a consensus on soft skills and employability skills, the meaning of employability skills can be conceptualized as core values, beliefs, traits, and behaviors that are relevant to the job market (Robles, 2012).

A range of life and skillsets are crucial to strive and thrive in today's workforce. In addition to the need to develop employability skills, the empowerment of PWDs through soft skills development is important to improve their employability and enhance social and workforce inclusion. Hence, the findings of this study uncovered unique and vital employability skills that are needed among PWDs. While a few of the employability skills are generally highly demanded in today's workforce, such as communication skills, leadership and managerial skills, critical thinking, and analytical skills, other skills such as active learning skills, self-grooming skills, resilience, and tolerance, and adaptivity and flexibility to the workforce nature can in particular improve the likelihood of PWDs to position themselves in the job market.

Numerous studies have attempted to determine the soft skills that are needed in the workforce (Santilli et al., 2018). Lippman et al. (2015), for instance, compared over 172 studies over the last 20 years that focused on specific soft skills required by employers. They found the following to be particularly important: (a) social skills,

referring to a set of skills to collaborate with others, including cultural sensitivity, context-appropriate behaviors, ability to act in line with social norms and resolve conflicts; (b) higher-order thinking, including problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making; (c) communication skills, referring to good expression, transmission, understanding as well as interpretation of knowledge and ideas; (d) self-control, regarding the ability to delay gratification, self-control, direct and focus attention as well as regulate feeling and behaviors; and (e) positive self-concept, including self-confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem as well as a sense of well-being and pride. Building on the premise that the aforementioned skills are relevant to employability, as discovered in this research, the complexity of the skills would also evolve depending on the nature of the organization and industrial landscape.

It is recommended for future research to analyze other factors related to employability traits and employ different methods of collecting research data to arrive at a more accurate description of the skills needed for the job market (Matteson et al., 2016), particularly for PWDs' decreased job opportunities as evidenced in the research. Müller and VanGilder (2014) posited that the perception of lack of soft skills in individuals with a disability is one of the main factors that makes it difficult for PWDs to find and maintain permanent and paid jobs. In addition, they added that PWDs often undergo interventions that do not necessarily help with soft skills development. These interventions include attendance at special contexts, high levels of contact with educational or socio-medical staff, low social contacts with peers, as well as low quality training. Consequently, all these can reduce the development of the social, communicative, problem-solving, and higher-thinking skills of PWDs (Lindsay et al., 2014; Nota, Soresi, Ferrari, & Solberg, 2008).

It cannot be denied that PWDs face great challenges in positioning themselves in the job market, which is compounded by the negative perceptions of their capabilities in performing a specific task. As the job market is dominated by individuals who are not disabled, the recruitment of PWDs becomes more uncertain. Therefore, the findings of this research shed light on different ways to tackle the issue of unemployment among PWDs. Soft skills development in particular was identified as an influential factor of job success across different levels of employment (Lippman et al., 2015; Santilli, 2018). By developing employability skills or soft skills among PWD through educational and training programs, they are more likely to survive in the job market.

PWDs can impress and excel in their job responsibilities through tangible efforts to fulfill certain job responsibilities that increase retention and motivation to work; in fact, these can also become the factors for employers to hire them. Building a positive perception on the reputation of PWDs could create a more inclusive job landscape. The absence of employability skills among PWDs is also linked to the discrimination of opportunities in the job market. Lindsay et al. (2014), for instance, demonstrated

that employers' perspectives in recruiting people with a handicap were pessimistic as they had unjust perceptions that PWDs were less skillful, particularly in their social and networking abilities, compared to other colleagues. Hence, the mastery of soft skills can bring advantages and benefits to employees in accessing decent job opportunities. Potential employees that have the necessary employability skills could also secure more job offers and opportunities to enter the workforce that may improve their quality of life (Lippman et al., 2015). This is particularly true for those who are marginalized and isolated from fair job opportunities, such as the struggle faced by PWDs.

Given these pivotal aspects of job success among PWDs, reskilling and upskilling programs should be employed to help increase PWDs' opportunities to secure jobs. With regard to training programs that aim to develop specific soft skills in individuals with a disability, this study makes special mention to employability skills development for PWDs that aim to promote the most relevant skills in today's job market, including soft skills that focus on typical social situations in the workplace for any type of employee. Specifically, it is hoped that the intervention can increase the participation of PWDs in the workforce without neglecting their talents and potential.

7. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to explore the employability skills that were gained by PWDs after attending an intervention training program. The case study analysis revealed seven vital skills to thrive in the workforce especially among PWDs: (a) communication skills, (b) leadership and managerial skills, (c) active learning skills, (d) self-grooming skills, (e) resilience and tolerance, (f) adaptivity and flexibility, and (g) critical thinking and analytical skills. Practically, the above employability skills are significant for PWDs employment. Following this, education and training institutions that are associated with PWDs should strategize and revise their training modules to be more vigorous in producing employable PWDs for the job market. Therefore, a systematic and structured curriculum that integrates employability skills training should be developed to foster the skills that are demanded among PWDs. Relevant instructors and mentors should also facilitate PWDs' employability skills through daily practices that include communication, problem-solving, and other related skills similar to the findings of this study. The emergent traits from the findings of this study tallied with the skills needed by current industrial players and corroborate existing employable trends. While the current job market seems prejudiced against PWD, the values and traits developed during reskilling and upskilling programs can be beneficial for them to venture into other occupations that are beyond their area of expertise. In addition, PWDs can also venture into entrepreneurship as a promising alternative. PWDs should strive to enhance their prospects by engaging in training that supports the development of employability

and soft skills that can increase the likelihood of getting recruited by potential organizations. Future research should focus on a longitudinal investigation of PWDs' employment. For instance, a comprehensive investigation on the influence of employability skills among PWDs' career development can fulfill the gap in this study. Possible research directions could also include the process of developing employability skills through training modules and identify best practices in employability skills training.

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