

Bridging Education and Industry: A Case Study of Work-Based Learning in Brunei Darussalam's Government Secondary Schools

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Abstract: *The Pre-Vocational Programme is a 5-year programme introduced in Brunei Darussalam since 1999 that serves students with various disabilities, in 28 selected government secondary schools. Since its implementation, graduates have faced difficulties in finding and securing jobs because employers are unaware of the programme and the students' lack of employability skills. In the current job market, employers value employability skills more than just academic qualifications. Research has indicated that work-based learning is an essential part of secondary education because it helps improve students' self-esteem, reinforce basic academic and technical skills as well as promote the understanding of workplace culture and expectations. All students need a set of skills and attributes that will prepare them for future learning and employment. In Brunei Darussalam, work-based learning was implemented in 2022 in five selected government secondary schools involving four students. The main aim of work-based learning was to equip students with employability skills in preparation for work and to raise awareness of the Pre-Vocational Programme among the public. Nevertheless, there has been no research conducted on work-based learning in Brunei Darussalam. The current study addresses such gap by examining work-based learning through collaboration with local companies in the secondary government school setting. In the study, work-based learning consisted of a learning package embedded with the REACT strategy and Employability Skills Assessment Forms (ESAFs) jointly designed by the researcher, educational institutions and local companies along with a packaging activity provided by local companies. Five employability skills were selected for the study, specifically Attendance and Punctuality, Dress and Hygiene, Interpersonal Relations, Work Behaviour, and Self-Regulation. The findings indicated that the students developed the desired employability skills. Insights shared by the teachers are notably beneficial not only for the Ministry of Education, employers and school leaders in the possibility of extending work-based learning in other secondary schools but also non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in improving their training programmes catered for individuals with disabilities in preparing them for employment.*

Keywords: Employability skills, Pre-Vocational Programme, Students with Disabilities, Work-Based Learning

1. Introduction

Brunei Darussalam's Ministry of Education has embraced inclusive education after signing the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994). To support special educational needs of students in inclusive school, the

Pre-Vocational Programme was introduced in selected government secondary schools since 1999. This 5-year programme aims to develop students' academic, social, daily living, and pre-vocational skills, prepare them for adult life, and foster their contribution to society (Musim & Wong, 2006). Students in the program participate in work attachments in their fourth and fifth years, gaining practical experience. Upon completion, graduates receive a certificate equivalent to Year 9, accredited by the Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation Council (BDNAC for short), Ministry of Education (Abidin, 2022).

Despite its implementation for over 20 years, the Pre-Vocational Programme has not undergone significant changes or reviews (Abidin, 2022). The programme lacks a specific career education component, focusing primarily on basic skills for students with moderate to severe learning impairments. Although 1,492 students have graduated, only 230 graduates have found employment ("Pre-Vocational Graduates", 2016). Parents express concern about their children's future due to the limited opportunities for further education with a certificate of participation. Their children cannot further their studies to vocational or technical institutions with a certificate of participation as the entry requirement is based on public examination results such as the Brunei Cambridge General Certificate of Education "O" Level or the Brunei Cambridge General Certificate of Education "A" Level or accredited qualifications from other vocational or technical institutions (Abidin, 2022).

From a parental perspective, the Pre-Vocational Programme did not effectively prepare their children for the workforce (Shahbudin & Abdul Mokti, 2004). The graduates were found to lack essential soft skills (employability skills) (Abdul Tahir, 2011), lack of job-related skills (Abidin, 2022), and faced discrimination from employers who equated disabilities with inabilities (Ismail, 2011). Additionally, employers in Brunei Darussalam were unfamiliar with the pre-vocational certificate and lacked confidence in its value (Shahbudin & Abdul Mokti, 2004). For students with disabilities, it is necessary for them to be taught employability skills in schools, as the skills are important for job search and job retention which leads to successful employment (Guy et al., 2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employability Skills

Nowadays, employability skills are seen as complementary to hard skills and necessary to achieve successful workplace performance (Robles, 2012). Employability skills refer to knowledge, skills, understanding, and personal attributes that enable a person to get employment, be satisfied, and successful in their chosen career (Lorraine & Sewell, 2007). Employers have emphasised top employability skills such as following instructions, being punctual, being respectful, sufficient basic skills (reading, writing, and communicating) and basic work skills (attendance, follow schedules and stay on task, and monitor quality of work) (Ju et al., 2012). Thus, it is important for educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels to exert emphasis in developing the skills. Clearly, it is important for the future workforce to have not only just hard skills, but also employability skills.

However, a significant body of literature has indicated that an employability skills gap exists across nations (Jackson, 2010) and disciplines (Messum et al., 2016) because employers, employees, and educators ascribe different levels of importance on employability skills (Sarfranz et al., 2018). To narrow the skill gap, educational institutions need to partner with the industry sectors to ascertain the skills preferred by employers when they recruit new employees

(Kivinen & Silvennoinen, 2002). Ritter et al., (2017) argued that it is imperative to include employability skills in the curriculum, as it is essential for students' success in their future jobs. Within the Pre-Vocational Programme, students with moderate to severe learning impairments typically receive instruction in fundamental academic skills, life and social skills, and basic vocational and work skills, following a general curriculum developed by the Special Education Unit (Ismail, 2011). Yet, many of the students are unemployed after completing the programme. Ismail (2011) argued that it is due to students lacking the employability skills and the perception of employers of equating impairment with inability. This is consistent with a study by Domzal et al. (2008) in which they reported that employers are less interested in hiring people with disabilities due to lack of employability skills. Furthermore, one of the main obstacles for young students with disabilities to obtain employment is the absence of strong employability skills instructions in secondary schools (Gilson et al., 2017). Therefore, educational institutions are blamed for their inability and weak preparation of students with employability skills to meet the needs of employers (Zainudin et al., 2009). Taylor (2012) had highlighted that teachers need to acquire the expertise and abilities required to deliver vocational education to students with disabilities.

In the context of Brunei Darussalam, employers identified resource skills, personal qualities, basic skills, and interpersonal skills as the most essential employability skills (Abidin et al., 2019). They recommended incorporating skills such as safety awareness, understanding work culture, social skills, punctuality and attendance, work quality, appearance, work consistency, and basic academics (reading, writing, and numeracy) into the Pre-Vocational Programme (Abidin, 2011).

Despite the importance of employability skills, teachers in the Pre-Vocational Programme encounter challenges in integrating them into their curriculum. Among the challenges faced are no available guidelines and content on employability skills, no evaluation tools to measure employability skills, do not comprehend the importance of employability skills and teaching skills based on personal assumptions (Abidin et al., 2019). The researcher believes that students with disabilities in the Pre-Vocational Programme need to learn relevant employability skills before graduating. This is because they face lower employment rates compared to mainstream students. The researcher's belief is supported by Rabey (2008). According to Rabey (2008), secondary schools need to place more emphasis on life skills, work skills, and knowledge of the workplace in order to prepare students for the workforce. To identify the most important skills, the researcher organised a discussion with employers and teachers. The discussion resulted in the agreement to focus on five key employability skills: Attendance and Punctuality, Dress and Hygiene, Interpersonal Relations, Work Behaviour, and Self-Regulation. A majority of employers indicate that primary employment barriers for students with disabilities include inadequate employability skills such as punctuality, self-regulation, social skills, task accuracy, and work completion (Riesen et al., 2014) and grooming and personal hygiene (Graffam et al., 2002). Thus, five main skills were incorporated in the Employability Skills Assessment Forms (ESAFs) and learning package to be used in the work-based learning.

In today's world, it is important for young people to develop employability skills and understand how the working world differs from schools (European Training Foundation, 2013). To enhance employability skills training, it is essential to have close cooperation between the school, students, and employers (Dania et al., 2014). Such cooperation between school, students, and employers can be achieved through work-based learning. Work-based learning can help prepare young people for the world of work (European Training Foundation, 2013). Research since 1985 has also shown that when students with disabilities are involved in

work-based learning, their post-school outcomes are likely to improve (Carter et al., 2011; Test et al., 2009).

2.2 Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning is a type of experiential or active learning commonly used in vocational education and training in order to develop basic work habits, occupational identity, and specific occupational competences (Sweet, 2013). According to Becker (2013), work-based learning is a well-known approach involving work experiences as part of learning in educational institutions to increase employment-related competencies and experiences. Work-based learning should be made an essential part of secondary education for students with disabilities to help increase their employment rate. To ensure that students with disabilities get maximum benefit gained from work-based learning, there should be connections between school-based learning and work, clear expectations of student activity at the workplace, clearly defined roles of teachers and supervisors, and structured feedback on students' performance (Luecking & Gramlich, 2003).

Today, work-based learning is common and extensively implemented in higher education institutions as a means to develop the employability skills of students (Brodie & Irving, 2007). Thus, the study wishes to address a research gap that exists in Brunei Darussalam. Currently, there is a lack of research on work-based learning in the local context, especially in the secondary school setting. As such, the study focused on a new learning situation in selected government secondary schools that used work-based learning as a key strategy to develop the employability skills of students in the Pre-Vocational Programme students. Work-based learning used in the study consisted of learning package embedded with REACT strategy and Employability Skills Assessment Forms (ESAFs) developed together by the researcher, employers and teachers and stock supplies provided by employers. Koohang et al. (2009) argued that teaching materials embedded with the REACT strategy provide opportunities for meaningful learning for students. REACT strategy refers to each stage of relating, experiencing, applying, cooperating, and transferring. As more REACT strategy is used, more contextual teaching and learning will take place in classrooms (Ingram, 2003). In today's education, the REACT strategy has become a new and modern methodology, since it deals with the concept of contextualisation that helps students understand what they are learning by connecting the subject with their daily living experiences, creating a lively classroom atmosphere (Rohayati, 2013). Koohang et al. (2009) argued that meaningful learning experiences can have a profound impact on students' development, particularly in terms of their interpersonal, intrapersonal, and knowledge-related skills.

To attend to the critical gaps in knowledge about implementation of work-based learning in secondary school settings, this study was guided by two key research questions. This research explores teachers' perceptions of work-based learning, and offers suggestions for improvement.

The two specific questions are as follow:

- 1) What are the teachers' views on work-based learning in selected schools?
- 2) What are the suggestions to improve the implementation of work-based learning?

3. Methodology

As work-based learning was introduced for the first time in selected government secondary schools in Brunei Darussalam, the researcher chose an exploratory case study in order to gain an in-depth appreciation of the phenomena. According to Yin (2003), an exploratory case study

is suitably used to explore situations or interventions that have no clear or single set of outcomes. Additionally, exploratory case studies are widely used in research when there are few or no previous studies to refer to or rely on to predict an outcome (Yin, 2003). A qualitative research approach was employed to understand teachers' perspectives on work-based learning. Data was collected through the Work-Based Learning Evaluation Online Form, focus group interviews, teachers' reports and online feedback, and researcher observations. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of teachers' insights and experiences. In qualitative research methods, focus group interviews are commonly used (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), as it involves a researcher acting as a moderator to lead a discussion with a small group of individuals to examine how group members think and feel about a particular topic (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In the study, the researcher took written field notes to help the researcher produce meaning, especially when looking at the data and understanding the phenomenon being studied. According to Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018), field notes are widely used as a way to document contextual information, and it is an essential component in qualitative research. In fact, most qualitative research methods encouraged researchers to take field notes as they provide rich contextual data for analysis and enhance data (Creswell, 2013). For the study, the researcher purposefully sampled the participants. Purposeful sampling is used when a researcher intentionally selects participants who will experience the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The phenomenon in this study was implementation of work-based learning in five selected government secondary schools. Therefore, participants were selected students and teachers. In the context of this research paper, the researcher aimed to report insights from teachers in the Pre-Vocational Programme.

4. Findings

This section describes the study results derived from all data collected from various tools such as Employability Skills Assessment Forms (ESAFs), Work-Based Learning Evaluation Online Forms, focus group interviews, teachers' reports and online feedback, and field notes to answer two research questions. The findings are explicated in relation to each research question which framed the design of the study.

4.1 Results for Research Question One: Teachers' View on Work-Based Learning in Their Schools

Generally, all the teachers shared positive views on the implementation of work-based learning in their schools. The teachers mentioned that their students involved in the work-based learning developed the five employability skills specifically Attendance and Punctuality, Dress and Hygiene, Interpersonal Relations, Work Behaviour, and Self-Regulation based on the data recorded using the Employability Skills Assessment Forms (ESAFs).

Teachers reported that implementing work-based learning had several positive outcomes, including: 1) enhancing teaching quality, 2) improving student learning outcomes, 3) boosting student confidence levels, and 4) developing students' employability skills as illustrated in Figure 1.

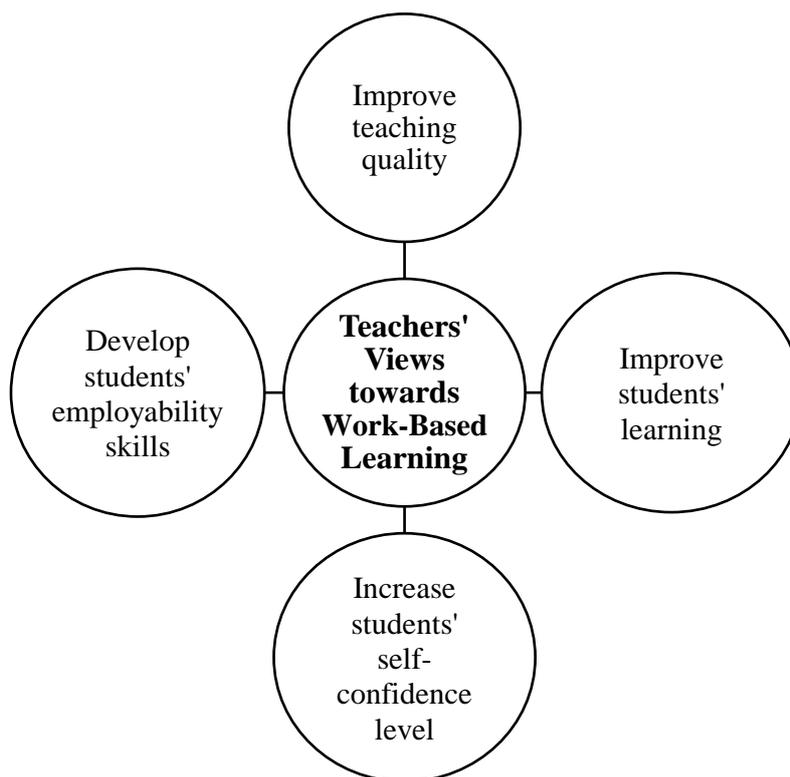


Figure 1: Teachers' Views towards Work-based learning

Improve Teaching Quality

Teachers found that work-based learning enhanced their teaching methods in the Pre-Vocational Programme. The collaboratively developed learning package proved valuable as it aligned with employer-prioritised skills, aiding teachers in understanding and teaching essential skills for students' future employment. The comprehensive and user-friendly package contributed to improved teaching quality, leading to enhanced student learning outcomes.

Improve Students' Learning

Teachers observed that work-based learning positively impacted student learning. By bridging classroom knowledge with real-world experiences, students were able to grasp essential employability skills highlighted by employers. Through the learning package and simulated packaging activity, students effectively applied these skills, leading to improved retention and mastery, as demonstrated by their practical ability.

Increase in Students' Self-Confidence Level

Teachers observed that work-based learning significantly boosted students' self-confidence. By providing opportunities to showcase their abilities, perform tasks, and solve problems in a simulated work environment, students' motivation and enthusiasm were heightened. This contextualised learning approach allowed students to acquire practical skills and knowledge that might not have been possible through traditional theoretical learning. Students' self-confidence grew as they were able to comprehend their learning, follow work routines independently, and remain focused on tasks to achieve goals.

Develop Students' Employability Skills

The study found that work-based learning effectively developed students' employability skills. Students improved their attendance, punctuality, personal hygiene, dress code adherence, interpersonal relations, teamwork, work habits, and self-regulation, demonstrating initiative,

responsibility, and a desire to learn and grow. Teachers observed that prolonged participation in work-based learning prepared students for work commitments, fostering an understanding of the work-payment relationship and basic financial skills. Regular attendance form completion also enhanced students' reading, time-telling, and date recognition abilities.

While the overall feedback was positive, teachers did mention some difficulties they faced, such as inconsistent stock availability, limited storage space, take longer time to pack, the creation of extra worksheets and teaching aids, and take time to teach. This is because the work-based learning was conducted in classroom settings and Pre-Vocational students consisted of students with various disabilities in one classroom.

4.2 Results for Research Question Two: Suggestions to Improve Implementation of Work-Based Learning

Four main themes emerged from the teacher suggestions: (1) improving the learning package, (2) adding more topics, (3) conducting sharing sessions, and (4) appointing a focal person as shown in Figure 2. Overall, the teachers advocated for improvements to the learning package and the implementation of work-based learning.

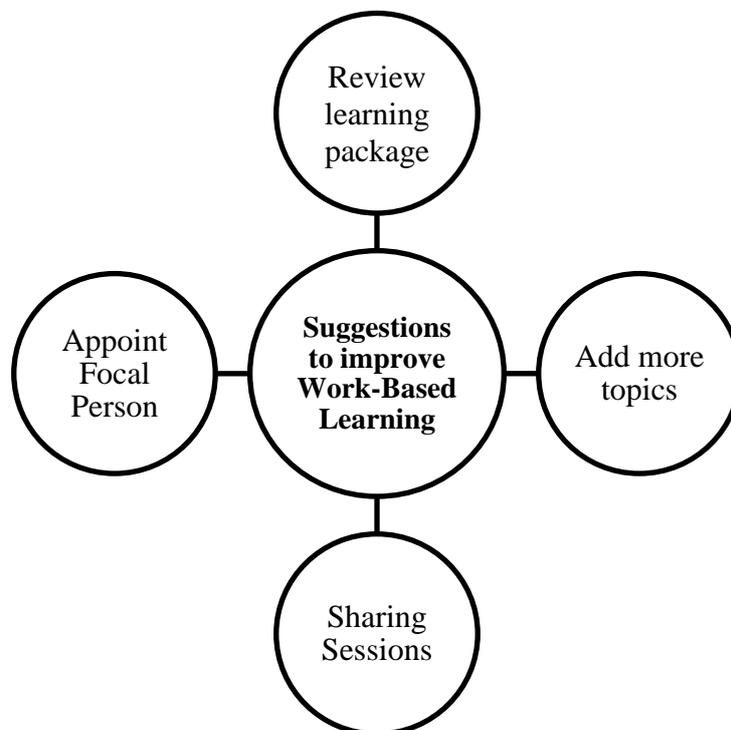


Figure 2: Suggestions to Improve Work-Based Learning

5. Discussion

The current study indicated a positive impact on the employability skills of the students in the Pre-Vocational Programme as they achieved a high level of performance and mastery. To date, there are not many instructional strategies to teach employability skills to students with disabilities (Agran et al., 2016).

The study found that the teachers shared positive views on work-based learning, such as the development of students' employability skills, improvement of the quality of teaching and learning and increased self-confidence of the students. Teachers asserted that work-based

learning was an effective strategy to develop the employability skills of the Pre-Vocational Programme students. This is supported by Becker (2013). According to Becker (2013), the use of work-based learning as part of the student learning process in educational institutions will increase employment-related competencies and work experiences.

The finding of the current study has also taken a step in the direction of justifying the implementation of work-based learning at the secondary school level. Much of the current literature on work-based learning pays particular attention to vocational and technical education and higher education settings and is regarded as an essential component in its course programmes (Sweet, 2013). Therefore, the introduction of work-based learning in government secondary schools that implement the Pre-Vocational Programme in Brunei Darussalam is seen as a promising strategy for teaching and evaluating the employability skills of students with disabilities. According to Halim et al. (2019), employability skills of students with disabilities can be developed and increased by introducing them to more practical programmes with external agencies, community service programme, entrepreneurship programme and problem-solving exercises.

As work-based learning for the study consisted of the learning package embedded with REACT strategy and the packaging activity, the students could apply and transfer what they learned and developed their employability skills accordingly during the packaging activity. In the course of time, the students could follow the packaging activity routine and do assigned tasks without any reminder from the teachers. This finding supports the idea of Symonds et al. (2011), Koohang et al. (2009) and Johnson (2002). Symonds et al. (2011) claimed that using work-based learning provides opportunities for most young people to learn best in a structured programme combining learning and work and where learning is contextual and applied. Koohang et al. (2009) argued that teaching materials embedded with the REACT strategy provide opportunities for meaningful learning for students. Koohang et al. (2009) added that such meaningful learning will provide a powerful learning experience for students such as improving interpersonal, intrapersonal, and knowledge-related competencies. As more REACT strategy is used, more contextual teaching and learning will take place in classrooms (Ingram, 2003). Johnson (2002) explained that students will learn better and remember more when they are able to find meaning in academic lessons. The findings of the study suggest that contextual teaching and learning is beneficial for students with disabilities in the Pre-Vocational Programme to improve their learning.

Based on the analysis of the focus group interview transcript and reports, teachers emphasised that their students' self-confidence improved and that they could independently carry out assigned tasks in the packaging activity. In addition, the students always enjoyed classroom lessons and the packaging activity. This finding further supports the notion of the Centre for Evidence Based Management (2019) that individuals' self-confidence, motivation, and satisfaction would increase through work-based learning as they could apply theory to practice. Despite sharing the positive views, some challenges were shared by the teachers. Generally, the challenges encountered were related to stock issues, such as the place to keep stock and irregular supply, creating additional worksheets, requiring more time to teach and complete the packaging by the students. Regardless of the challenges, the teachers expressed a strong interest in sustaining the implementation of work-based learning in their schools because it generated positive changes in their students and classroom culture. This is consistent with previous research by Haruna and Kamin (2019), in which they indicated that teachers believed that work-based learning could instill positive attitudes in students toward school to work and facilitate a seamless implementation of work-based learning.

6. Conclusions

In general, the study indicated that the implementation of work-based learning in selected government secondary schools has contributed positively not only to the employability skills of students, particularly in the aspects of Attendance and Punctuality, Dress and Hygiene, Interpersonal Relations, Work Behavior and Self-Regulation, but also teachers' views and the learning environment in the Pre- Vocational Programme. To develop students' employability skills, the study revealed the importance of contextual teaching and learning by using the REACT strategy embedded in the learning package and the packaging activity. Opinions and suggestions shared by teachers serve as guide in improving the implementation of work-based learning in secondary school settings. It offers the possibility of more opportunities for work-based learning to be implemented in other government secondary schools offering the Pre-Vocational Programme in Brunei Darussalam. The finding of the current study is also significant for the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in improving their existing training programmes geared to preparing people with disabilities for employment.

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