

Career Choice Inclination Based on Field of Study among Special Skills Certificate Graduates at Polytechnic

Nur Syafiqah Nor Azman, Nurul Aini Mohd Ahyan*, Nur Adiba
Rosle, Nur Hazirah Noh@Seth, Hanifah Jambari

Faculty of Educational Sciences and Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310, Johor
Bahru, Johor

*Corresponding Author Email: nurul.aini@utm.my

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Abstract

Career choice is a significant decision in an individual's life. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the level of career choice inclination among prospective graduates of the Special Skills Certificate and the factors that restrict their employment opportunities based on their field of study at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan (PIS). A total of 41 prospective graduates participated in this study, comprising students from the Certificate in Fashion and Apparel Design, Certificate in Graphic Design, and Certificate in Hotel and Catering programmes. This quantitative research employed descriptive and inferential analyses to collect and interpret data. Overall, the findings revealed that the inclination level of Special Skills Certificate graduates to work according to their field of study was moderate, with a mean score of 3.31. The most dominant factor limiting their employment opportunities was low self-esteem, followed by disability. It is hoped that this study will receive attention from policymakers and institutional leaders in providing fair opportunities for Special Skills Certificate graduates to participate meaningfully in society without feeling marginalized.

Keywords: Career Choice Inclination, TVET, Hearing Impairment Graduates, Employment Barriers, Trait and Factor Theory.

Introduction

Special Skills Certificate graduates represent a minority group who are often less privileged within society. Their physical limitations may restrict their ability to fully participate in community life (Din, Mohamad, Talib, Ibrahim, & Yusuf, 2019). For hearing-impaired students pursuing the Special Skills Certificate, they too possess ambitions and aspirations to improve their quality of life, particularly through sustainable career opportunities.

Choosing an occupation for this group remains one of the most critical and challenging issues, as job stability and income security are essential to ensure that they can live independently without relying on others (Rosli, Sabri, Wahab, & Zakaria, 2015). Such differences significantly influence their inclinations and preferences in career selection. They

must also adapt their chosen careers to align with their respective fields of study at the polytechnic.

The inclination of Special Skills Certificate graduates to pursue careers aligned with their field of study should be consistent with their interests, readiness, and awareness of their training area. Accordingly, graduates who pursue careers based on their field of study are more likely to achieve holistic satisfaction.

Most graduates with disabilities believe that a small portion of society continues to discriminate against them. According to Mad Isa and Abdul Kadir (2014), many graduates with disabilities remain unemployed despite receiving education up to the age of 19. This reflects societal perceptions that continue to question their abilities. Furthermore, these graduates often perceive their disabilities as a major barrier to employment (Abdul Rahman & Abbas@Ahmad, 2018).

The job market has become increasingly competitive, with community colleges and training institutions producing a growing number of qualified graduates each year (Zakaria, Nasroddin, & Hashim, 2015). Graduates with special needs require close supervision, proper training, and undivided attention. In Malaysia, while various government and private initiatives aim to help ordinary citizens improve their standard of living, such support is not always accessible to those with disabilities. Consequently, these individuals continue to experience repeated setbacks in their efforts to achieve career success.

In the context of special education, graduates with Special Skills Certificates are recognized as a key equity group, as their participation, progression, and post-graduation employment rates are important indicators of inclusion. Disabilities encompass a wide range of characteristics, including physical, medical, visual, learning, hearing, and intellectual impairments, many of which are compatible with employment opportunities. Reports have shown that thousands of graduates with hearing impairments are engaged in various occupations, including those requiring advanced skills.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the level of career inclination among Special Skills Certificate graduates at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan to work in their respective fields of study, the barriers that hinder their employment, and any differences in career inclination based on gender. Special education refers to education designed for individuals with special needs, including those with hearing impairments, visual impairments, physical disabilities, and learning difficulties.

Level of Work Inclination

The importance of inclination in the process of career decision-making should not be underestimated. Anyone who shows genuine interest in a specific area will have a higher chance of achieving success in that field. As noted by Holland (2010), personal inclination and interest play a significant role in the decision-making process.

Career choice is often influenced or driven by an individual's interests that emerge through education and learning experiences. This interest can be expressed as a strong desire toward a particular activity or field. In this study, the Trait and Factor Theory is applied to

examine the level of work inclination among prospective Special Skills Certificate graduates according to their field of study.

Trait and Factor Theory

According to Brown (as cited in Atli, 2016), individuals must be aware of their abilities, interests, and values and seek professional advice to make sound decisions during the career selection process. Every person possesses certain psychological characteristics shaped by the interaction between the individual and the environment. People tend to choose jobs that match their interests, preferred behaviors, and desired actions (Mohammad and Othman, 2018).

Parson (1909) emphasized that, to select a career, a person must have a clear understanding of themselves, including their attitudes, talents, interests, goals, financial resources, and motivation. In addition, they need to acquire knowledge about the job industry, such as the types of roles available, job descriptions, working conditions, salary ranges, and requirements. In other words, career decisions should be made by comparing one's self-knowledge with workplace requirements.

This concept also highlights that a person's personality should match the demands of their career or academic program. The alignment between personal traits and occupational or study program characteristics is therefore essential (Mohammad and Othman, 2018)

The theory identifies five key personal traits that influence career selection: aptitude, achievement, interest, values, and personality. Aptitude is used to predict future success in education or employment. Achievement refers to the measurable accomplishments that reflect one's effort and ability to perform effectively in various contexts. When applying for a job, individuals should undergo interest assessments to identify the types of work that best suit them.

Personal values, on the other hand, are the internal principles that guide an individual's behavior and choices when selecting a career. To align self-knowledge with occupational information, individuals must first develop a deep understanding of themselves and then gather sufficient information about the jobs they aspire to. This process ensures that their chosen career complements their personality and strengths.

Disability

The central issue among graduates with special needs concerns their disabilities, which are often perceived as barriers to acquiring knowledge, communicating effectively, and obtaining employment (Mohammed et al., 2021). In 2008, the Malaysian government implemented a policy requiring public service departments to allocate at least 1% of available positions to persons with disabilities. Under this quota, approximately 14,000 job opportunities in the government sector were expected to be opened for graduates with disabilities in Malaysia (Lavasani, Wahat, and Ortega, 2015).

However, five years later, the 1% target had still not been achieved. Statistics from the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia revealed that only 581 individuals with disabilities had been employed in the government sector since 2008 (Khoo, Tiun, and Lee, 2013).

In Malaysia, out of an estimated 2.4 million individuals employed in the past decade, only 3,523 were graduates with disabilities, most of whom worked in the private sector (Khoo et al., 2013). This figure is relatively small, indicating that the potential of graduates with disabilities as part of the national workforce remains largely untapped (Ta and Leng, 2013).

The process of securing employment is more difficult, restricted, and often obstructed for persons with disabilities, particularly those with hearing impairments. Interestingly, many among this group do not place the blame on the government or authorities for the lack of job opportunities but rather on their own challenges, including their disabilities, which they perceive as limitations.

Discrimination

Several empirical studies have shown that employers are often reluctant to hire graduates with disabilities (Rosli, Sabri, Wahab, and Zakaria, 2015). The *Washington Times* reported that more than 80% of employable persons with disabilities in developing countries remain excluded from the labor market.

According to the 2016 Graduate Tracer Study Report, 17% of graduates with disabilities reported experiencing discrimination during their job search. Many employers still hesitate to employ persons with disabilities in their organizations, and in most cases, these graduates are not even given the opportunity to apply for available positions.

Even those who manage to secure employment face numerous challenges in the workplace, including issues with their employers, colleagues, environment, and inadequate equipment (Narayanan, 2018).

To date, graduates with disabilities continue to face significant difficulties in gaining employment. Beyond these challenges, many also experience psychological and emotional distress as well as workplace discrimination and marginalization.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research approach using both descriptive and inferential methods. The research design was selected to systematically collect data from a defined population through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was based on a Likert scale, and data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25.0. This approach enabled the researchers to make generalizations through statistical analyses such as mean, frequency, and independent sample t-tests.

The research process began with identifying the problem, selecting the topic, and obtaining supervisor validation. Once the conceptual framework and research questions were established, the questionnaire instrument was developed based on relevant theories and previous studies. The questionnaire was then pilot-tested to evaluate the reliability and validity of its items before being distributed to the actual respondents. Data were collected, analyzed, and discussed to address the research questions and objectives.

The population of this study consisted of 41 students enrolled in the Special Skills Certificate program at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, comprising students from Semester 2 and

Semester 3. The three participating programs were the Certificate in Fashion and Apparel Design (17 students), Certificate in Graphic Design (10 students), and Certificate in Hotel and Catering (14 students). All respondents were hearing-impaired students. The study employed a total sampling technique since the population was small and manageable.

The main instrument of this study was a structured questionnaire comprising three sections:

Section A: Demographic Information

Section B: Level of Career Inclination

Section C: Factors Restricting Career Opportunities

All questionnaire items were reviewed and validated by two subject matter experts before being used in the actual study. Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25.0. Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine respondents' background information, mean scores, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages for Sections A, B, and C. Inferential analysis (independent sample t-test) was used to determine whether significant differences existed in career inclination based on gender.

To assess the reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted involving 10 students from Politeknik Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah (PSA). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for both main sections indicated a high level of reliability: $\alpha = 0.785$ for Section B (Career Inclination) and $\alpha = 0.782$ for Section C (Restricting Factors). Both values exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Piaw, 2006), demonstrating that the questionnaire items were reliable and internally consistent.

The content validity of the questionnaire was verified by two experienced lecturers specializing in special education and academic supervision. Items were reviewed for linguistic clarity, conceptual understanding, and construct relevance to the study objectives. Additional consultations were held to refine the items to ensure that they accurately measured the intended constructs.

The pilot study also aimed to evaluate the comprehensibility and clarity of the questionnaire items, ensuring that respondents understood each question without confusion. Beyond assessing reliability, the pilot study also helped determine the instrument's suitability for the actual context of hearing-impaired students at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan.

Findings and Discussion

The findings show that the majority of respondents were Malay, totaling 35 participants (85.4%). Chinese respondents comprised two participants (4.9%), Indian respondents three (7.3%), and one respondent identified as another ethnicity (2.4%).

In terms of study programs, most respondents were enrolled in the Certificate in Fashion and Apparel Design program, with 16 participants (39.0%), followed by the Certificate in Hotel and Catering program with 14 respondents (34.1%). The smallest group came from the Certificate in Graphic Design program, totaling 11 respondents (26.8%).

The study also found that a majority of respondents (21 individuals or 51.2%) had previous work experience, while the remaining 20 respondents (48.8%) had no prior work experience.

Research Question 1: Level of Career Inclination Based on Field of Study

The first research question aimed to identify the level of career inclination among prospective Special Skills Certificate graduates based on their field of study at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan. Fifteen questionnaire items were used to measure this aspect.

The overall mean score obtained for this dimension was 3.31, indicating a moderate level of career inclination among respondents. The item "I enjoy and am able to follow the training and skills in my field of study effectively" recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.46$). The item with the second-highest mean ($M = 3.44$) was "I am confident in my abilities within my chosen study field."

Items such as "My field of study helps me master knowledge and skills" ($M = 3.37$) and "I already have plans to work in this field after graduation" ($M = 3.34$) also scored above the overall average. Other items, including "I am interested in building a career that matches my qualifications" and "My study program prepares me for my desired job", each obtained a mean of 3.29, indicating consistent moderate interest across respondents.

These results suggest that although students show a positive tendency toward pursuing careers within their field of study, their confidence and readiness to enter the workforce still require enhancement.

Research Question 2: Factors Restricting Career Opportunities

The second research question explored the factors that restrict Special Skills Certificate graduates from obtaining employment in their respective fields of study. This section consisted of 15 items.

Analysis revealed that low self-esteem was the most dominant restricting factor ($M = 3.51$), followed by disability ($M = 3.46$). The lowest factor was discrimination, indicating that while it exists, personal and internal challenges play a larger role in limiting employment opportunities.

The item "I am confident that I can progress in my future career" recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.51$). The next highest mean scores ($M = 3.46$) were found for the items "I believe I can perform work tasks independently," "I can adapt to my work environment," and "I can contribute effectively in the workplace."

Items such as "I can succeed through my own efforts without relying on others" ($M = 3.39$), "I can manage emotional stability and stress" ($M = 3.37$), and "I have mastered communication, social, and interpersonal skills" ($M = 3.22$) reflected moderate confidence among respondents.

The items "Societal perception does not affect me" and "I can obtain employment based on my own abilities" each recorded a mean score of 3.20.

Meanwhile, the items “I do not need others to accompany me wherever I go” ($M = 3.10$) and “I lack the knowledge and skills required for future work” ($M = 3.00$) scored lower. The lowest items were “I find it difficult to obtain employment due to my disability” ($M = 2.90$) and “I feel discouraged to apply for jobs” ($M = 2.93$), indicating that internal confidence remains a crucial challenge.

The overall mean for this dimension was 3.24, representing a moderate level of restriction, implying that although the graduates show motivation to work, they still face psychological and practical barriers to achieving employment success.

Table 1

Independent Sample t-Test Analysis

Aspect	Gender	N	Mean	t
Career Inclination	Male	17	3.33	0.29
Career Inclination	Female	24	3.29	—

The results of the independent sample t-test indicated that there was no significant difference in the level of career inclination based on gender among prospective Special Skills Certificate graduates at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan. The significance value obtained ($p = 0.78$) was greater than 0.05, confirming that the null hypothesis was accepted.

This finding implies that both male and female respondents demonstrated similar levels of inclination toward pursuing careers in their respective fields of study.

Demographic Summary

The findings further revealed that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 21 years (24 individuals), while 10 respondents were between 22 and 23 years old. Six respondents were aged between 18 and 19, and only one respondent was above 23 years old. This shows that most Semester 2 and 3 students at the polytechnic are between 20 and 21 years of age.

The study also found that there were more female respondents (24) than male respondents (17), indicating that female students dominate enrollment in Special Skills Certificate programs at the polytechnic.

In summary, Malay respondents formed the largest ethnic group (35 individuals), reflecting the demographic composition of most polytechnic students. Students with prior work experience accounted for slightly more than half of the respondents (51.2%), suggesting moderate exposure to workplace environments.

Discussion

The discussion in this study is based on the findings presented in the previous section and focuses on addressing the two main research questions: 1) The level of career inclination among prospective Special Skills Certificate graduates to work in their respective fields of study and 2) The factors that restrict their opportunities to obtain employment in those fields.

The overall mean score for the first research question was 3.31, indicating a moderate level of inclination among graduates to pursue careers in their field of study. This finding suggests that while students show interest in continuing their careers within their area of training, their readiness and confidence to transition into the workforce remain limited.

According to the results, students' inclination to learn and continue in their respective study fields plays a crucial role in determining their future career choices. This inclination serves as a key factor in career selection, as a person's passion and interest strongly influence their motivation to achieve career aspirations (Hamid, 2012). This is consistent with the study conducted by Mamat and Abd Rahman (2019), who found that individuals who show interest in what they study tend to perform better and achieve higher levels of success.

Furthermore, parental influence and encouragement were identified as important elements that affect graduates' career choices. Many students chose their study fields based on their parents' preferences, which may also influence their later career decisions. This finding is consistent with Roslan and Abd Wahab (2013), who asserted that children's educational and occupational achievements are often shaped by the educational level of their parents. Mat Aris (2012) similarly highlighted that working parents can influence their children to pursue careers in similar fields.

Graduates also demonstrated a tendency to seek employment in their area of study based on their acquired skills and knowledge. Throughout their time at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, students were likely influenced by their personal abilities and the learning environment, both of which contribute to shaping their future career choices. This aligns with the findings of Hashim and Abd Latib (2020), who emphasized that the ability and experience of graduates are essential factors in securing employment related to their field of study.

Self-belief and confidence were also found to be significant factors influencing graduates' inclination to work within their field of study. These characteristics can help overcome the career challenges faced by students with disabilities. Sukri and Nachiappan (2021) emphasized that understanding one's strengths and weaknesses contributes to the development of self-confidence, which in turn motivates graduates to work diligently toward achieving their career goals.

The findings also revealed that low self-esteem is the most dominant factor restricting graduates' employment opportunities. Although many graduates believed they could succeed in their careers, the study by Abd Sani, Bahari, and Voo (2021) found that self-acceptance and adjustment to working life are often challenging for graduates with hearing impairments. These individuals may experience internal conflict, loneliness, separation anxiety, stress, and financial difficulties, all of which hinder their ability to adapt to workplace environments. This challenge is not unique to hearing-impaired students but is also faced by many graduates with various disabilities.

In addition to psychological barriers, family attitudes were also identified as potential obstacles. According to Lee, Abdullah, and Mey (2011), parents of children with disabilities often adopt a pessimistic and overprotective attitude, which discourages their children from entering the workforce. O'Donnell (2014) similarly reported that excessive parental caution

can negatively affect the emotional and social readiness of graduates to seek employment. Mugabi (2012) further explained that such protective behaviors may prevent young adults with disabilities from leaving home for work, which in turn lowers their confidence and limits their independence.

Social perception and employer attitudes were also identified as major external challenges. Many employers remain hesitant to hire individuals with disabilities, as interviewers often question their capabilities. This results in unfair treatment or outright rejection during job applications. Benoit, Jansson, Jansenberger, and Phillips (2012) noted that societal stigma contributes significantly to employers' reluctance to hire individuals with disabilities, particularly those with hearing or speech impairments. Similarly, Falina, Ahmad Sabri, Abdul Wahab, and Zakaria (2015) pointed out that stereotypes associating persons with disabilities only with roles such as massage therapists or telephone operators limit their access to diverse job opportunities. Such stigmas indirectly perpetuate discrimination against these graduates.

An independent sample t-test was conducted to determine whether gender differences influence career inclination among Special Skills Certificate graduates. The analysis revealed no significant difference between male and female respondents, with a significance value of 0.78 ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that both genders exhibited similar levels of interest and motivation toward careers aligned with their fields of study.

While some studies, such as Zaib (2014), have suggested gender differences in career interests, particularly in realistic and conventional fields (Mansor, 2001), other researchers, including Misran et al. (2012) and A. Manaf (2013), found no significant gender-based differences. These studies support the notion that career selection among students, regardless of gender, is influenced more by the suitability of the career to personal attributes and interests rather than gender identity.

Conclusion

Based on the findings discussed, the researchers formulated an infographic framework summarizing the dominant items identified in this study. The results indicate that personal interest in the field of study is the primary factor influencing the career choices of Special Skills Certificate graduates at Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan. Parental encouragement and support also play a significant role in shaping these career decisions.

Furthermore, the graduates' own abilities, acquired skills, and confidence in their potential are central to determining their career inclination. The findings highlight the importance of empowering students with disabilities by providing them with inclusive career guidance, vocational exposure, and equal employment opportunities.

It is therefore recommended that policymakers and educational institutions strengthen initiatives that promote career readiness among students with special needs. Such efforts should include collaboration between polytechnics, industry partners, and government agencies to design more inclusive job placement programs, ensure workplace accessibility, and eliminate discriminatory practices that hinder employment participation.

By fostering confidence and independence, these initiatives can enhance the employability of Special Skills Certificate graduates, ensuring that they contribute productively to society while achieving personal and professional fulfillment.

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