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# TABLE of CONTENTS

<b>KECEMERLANGAN DALAM AL-QURAN SEBAGAI STRATEGI PEMERKASAAN GENERASI MUDA MELAYU BUMIPUTERA</b> ¹Noor Syahidah Mohamad Akhir	<b>1 -11</b>
<b>EXPLORATORY APPROACH UTILISING VIRTUAL REALITY TECHNOLOGY TOOLS FOR DONGBA SCRIPT CULTURAL HERITAGE PROMOTION</b> Liang Xin¹, Azhari Md Hashim² & Li Wen Feng³	<b>12 -24</b>
<b>ASSESSMENT OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH AWARENESS OF PUBLIC SERVANTS IN THE WORKPLACE</b> Rosley Jaafar¹, Norazah Umar², Anas Ibrahim³ & Muhammad Aiman Abdul Halim⁴	<b>25 - 41</b>
<b>MUSLIM YOUNG CONSUMER INTENTION TO PURCHASE HALAL COSMETIC AND PERSONAL CARE PRODUCTS</b> Zulaiha Ahmad¹, Farah Lina Azizan², Shamshul Anaz Kassim³, Ima Ilyani Dato' Hj. Ibrahim⁴, Muhammad Amirul Afiq Zailani⁵	<b>42 - 54</b>
<b>THE APPLICATION OF GOOGLE CLASSROOM FROM MALAYSIAN TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE</b> Peter Ong¹ & Md Jais Ismail²	<b>55 - 68</b>
<b>DETERMINATION OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DRUG ABUSE USING FUZZY ANALYTICAL HIERARCHY PROCESS (FAHP)</b> Norpah Mahat¹, Nur Khairunnisa², Jasmani Bidin³, Sharifah Fhahriyah⁴, Mohamad Najib Mohamad Fadzil⁵, Izleen Ibrahim⁶	<b>69 - 82</b>
<b>MEDICAL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS MUSIC EDUCATION: AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH IN NINGXIA</b> Zhikai Wang¹, Boo Ho Voon ², Yusman Yacob³ & Ying Lang⁴	<b>83 - 94</b>
<b>A COMPARISON OF MOTIF DESIGNS BETWEEN TENUN PAHANG DIRAJA AND TERENGGANU SONGKET</b> Mas Ayu Zainal @ Ismail¹, Siti Rohaya Yahaya² & Nani Hartina Ahmad³	<b>95 - 104</b>
<b>EXPLORING THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND POLICIES OF CLIMATE CHANGE ACROSS BORDERS: LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN SELECTED ASEAN COUNTRIES</b> Nor Zaini Zainal Abidin¹, Nur Irinah Mohamad Sirat² & Nurul Mazrah Manshor³	<b>105 - 119</b>
<b>FACTORS IMPACTING THE COMPANY'S PROFITABILITY IN FARMING AND AGRICULTURE SECTORS</b> Nur Hafizah Ahmad¹, Nurul Labanihuda Abdull Rahman² & Abdul Hafiz Yusof³	<b>120 - 133</b>
<b>DEVELOPING TRANSFORMATION MODULES FOR YOUNG INMATES IN MALAYSIAN PRISON SCHOOLS</b> Storey, J. M¹ & Jawing, E²	<b>134 - 144</b>
<b>LEARNERS' LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING MOTIVATION: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS</b> Nurshahirah Azman¹, Mirza Madihah Zainal², Noor Fazzrienee JZ Nun Ramlan¹ & Amirah Athirah Amir Yazid¹	<b>145 - 158</b>
<b>THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TASK BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT) TO IMPROVE ESL STUDENTS' FLUENCY</b> Daljeet Singh Sedhu¹, Jufiza A. Wahab², Mohd Nasurudin Hasbullah³, Thuraiya Mohd⁴ & Azrul Bahaluddin⁵	<b>159 - 173</b>



<b>ENHANCING GRAMMAR LEARNING MOTIVATION: A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON A MOBILE-ASSISTED INSTRUCTION TOOL</b> Aisyah Nazamud-din <sup>1*</sup> & Nur Aziela Aidit <sup>2</sup>	<b>174 - 185</b>
<b>IN-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS' BELIEFS OF GRAMMAR TEACHING AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SELANGOR, MALAYSIA</b> Azrina binti Abu Bakar <sup>1*</sup>	<b>186 - 194</b>
<b>COMPETITION-BASED LEARNING AND PROJECT-BASED LEARNING TO PROMOTE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE IN MATHEMATICS</b> Tammie Christy Saibin <sup>1*</sup> , Ung Ling Ling <sup>2</sup> , Janvin Janteng <sup>3</sup> & Norfazillah Matmali <sup>4</sup>	<b>195 - 212</b>
<b>ENHANCING LITERACY ENGAGEMENT WITH CULTURALLY RELEVANT READING MATERIALS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS</b> Auni Batrisyia Suharto <sup>1*</sup> , Puteri Rohani Megat Abdul Rahim <sup>2</sup> , Nuramira Anuar <sup>3</sup> & Nor Najihah Norafand <sup>4</sup>	<b>213 - 220</b>
<b>LEARNING STYLES OF DIPLOMA STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC</b> Noraziah Azizan <sup>1*</sup> , Nor Ashikin Ab Manan <sup>2</sup> , Johana Yusof <sup>3</sup> & Iza Faradiba Mohammad Patel <sup>4</sup>	<b>221 - 231</b>
<b>VOCABULARY ENHANCEMENT THROUGH POETRY WRITING IN ESL CLASSROOM</b> Nur Baiti binti Ismail Shauki <sup>1*</sup> & Juliazilah binti Junit <sup>2</sup>	<b>232 - 244</b>
<b>FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PURCHASE INTENTION OF SECOND-HAND PRODUCTS</b> Nor Ashikin Ab Manan <sup>1*</sup> & Nor Nadia Raslee <sup>2</sup>	<b>245 - 254</b>



## **DEVELOPING TRANSFORMATION MODULES FOR YOUNG INMATES IN MALAYSIAN PRISON SCHOOLS**

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### ABSTRACT

Education is a pivotal aspect of correctional programs in prison institutions, aiming to equip inmates with the essential skills and knowledge needed for successful reintegration into society post-release. However, concerns arise regarding the educational experiences of young inmates serving short-term sentences, typically less than one year. This case study addresses these concerns by developing supplementary modules specifically designed for young inmates in a selected prison school. Following the ADDIE framework, the study progressed through three phases. The needs analysis phase, conducted from July 2021 to August 2021, identified the specific requirements of six teachers working in the prison school. This ensured that the modules aligned with the educators' and young inmates' needs and challenges. During the design and development phase, from January 2022 to March 2022, experts provided feedback on the overall module design, content, and activities, refining them for effectiveness. The implementation phase occurred from April 2022 to September 2022, involving 57 students and 4 teachers in the selected prison school. Interviews and observations were conducted to gather data on the students' experiences with the modules. The analysis revealed positive outcomes: students expressed enjoyment, indicating their engagement and interest in the modules. This study has significant implications for the pedagogical approach in prison schools. By showcasing the success and effectiveness of the supplementary modules, it provides insights and guidance for planning fluid and organic teaching and learning activities in similar settings. The

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findings contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance educational opportunities for young inmates, promoting their successful reintegration into society upon release.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Young offenders in Malaysian Prisons**

From a legal perspective, Malaysian citizens bears criminal responsibility from the age of 10. However, they are not likely to be detained in prison or approved school (e.g., Henry Gurney) unless they have reached the age of 14 years or above. It is at this age that they are considered juveniles rather than children. The Prison Department of Malaysia categorizes those between 14 and 21 years as juveniles. This paper focuses specifically on this juvenile population and addresses the potential disruption to their education resulting from incarceration.

Approximately 70,000 inmates were detained in Malaysian prisons in 2021 (World Prison Brief: Malaysia, 2023), of which less than 5% were children / juveniles. Of the total 3457 detainees, 3147 (91%) were first time offenders, while only 310 (9%) were classified as repeat offenders (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2023). It is thus clear that a very high proportion of young offenders detained are new to the prison system and are likely to have been convicted of non-capital offences, such as drug taking or house breaking. Since the Malaysian courts are renowned for passing lenient sentences on children / juveniles, particularly those who are first time offenders, it is reasonable to assume - in the absence of specific statistics on types of crimes committed by juveniles and average sentence lengths - that a high proportion of young inmates are serving sentences which can be measured in months rather than years (citation). The causes of juvenile crime are varied with poverty being a primary factor, along with mental health issues, and associations which might lead to criminal behaviour.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Role of the Malaysian Prisons Department in Rehabilitation**

The issue of the incarceration of children and juveniles is not without controversy. Some believe that custodial sentences are too harsh and may cause lasting psychological damage to young minds, whereas others maintain that drastic measures are needed to stem the tide of crime and reduce recidivism. Regardless of ethical and other considerations, the fact remains that thousands of juveniles are serving prison time each year. Each of these young inmates is entitled according to international law to receive education while incarcerated. In line with this decree, the Malaysian Prisons Department makes it possible for young inmates to continue with their formal school education (e.g., PMR / SPM examination courses), and to undertake a four-part rehabilitation programme designed to prepare them for re-integration into society.

In 2002, the Malaysian Prisons Department launched a rehabilitation programme known as the Human Development Plan (PPI) based largely on holistic principles. As well as providing academic study and vocational skills courses, the programme addresses the inmates' physical,

mental, and spiritual needs. Organised sequentially, it begins by instilling basic discipline and respect for self and others, before going on to inculcate the work/life skills and self-confidence needed to thrive on re-entry into mainstream society. Thus, character or identity building is the key aim of the programme. The phases are titled the Orientation Phase, the Consolidation Phase, the Skills Phase, and Pre-Independence phase. In the Orientation Phase (2 months), young inmates learn to master themselves and their daily conduct, while in the following phase, Consolidation (6-12 months), the focus is on character development through counseling and spiritual guidance. In the Skills Phase (6-12 months), inmates are able to choose from a number of validated courses which offer certification and the prospect of employment e.g., the Certified Skills Module, Vocation Module and Business Module. Finally, the Pre-Independence Phase (3 months) is specifically for those who have completed all the other phases and who have less than one year of their sentence remaining, it gives students the opportunity to slowly assimilate back into society through participation in local school and community events. According to UNICEF (2013), "Overall, by participating in these programmes, young people are afforded the opportunity to develop not only their competitive skills, but also to change their thinking, goals and values."

Despite the sincere and high ambitions of the PPI, the results of the programme have not been altogether successful. According to Sham and Selvaratnam (2018, cited in Rosli et al, 2021), marginalization of former inmates by family members, employers and society in general has resulted in a significant number of them remaining homeless and jobless for sustained periods after their release. Rosli (2019) states that approximately 90% of inmates released from Kajang Prison, Kuala Lumpur end up homeless, with only 5-10% being picked up by their families. Perhaps the devisers of the PPI have underestimated the difficulty in overcoming stigma and prejudice when trying to get inmates accepted back into society. Another issue is that if the parents and families of the young offenders do not participate in the rehabilitation process the outcome is more likely to be negative (Savatia, Simiyu, & Nabiswa, 2020).

## **2.2 The Role of Universities in Prison Education**

While the Malaysian Prisons Department are endeavouring to provide transformational education for their inmates, Malaysian universities also have an important contribution to make. Higher education institutions are becoming ever more conscious of their civic responsibility and are launching outreach programmes designed to bring knowledge, training, and skills to the local community, of which the prison population is an often marginalised but equally important part. Such outreach programmes can offer benefits to the universities as well as the communities they serve, by enhancing their reputations as both knowledge and social welfare providers and cementing their significant role in community development. University programmes can be adapted for use in prison and can contribute to the rehabilitation of young offenders by helping them to attain the hard and soft skills that will enable them to become valued members of society on their return to civil life. Thus, such programmes have something to offer the wider community, as well as the young inmates who enroll in them.

## **3. Methodology**

The researchers decided to use an adapted form of the ADDIE model devised in the 1970s (Bundrage & Mapson, 2022) to develop learning content for the proposed intensive course. The ADDIE model has five sequential phases, namely Analysis, Design, Development,

Implementation, and Evaluation, but for the purposes of this study, these were amalgamated into three: (i) Needs Analysis, (ii) Design and Development, and (iii) Implementation and Evaluation. The benefits of the ADDIE model are that it helps identify the learning needs in a structured way and ensures all learning activities serve that goal, thus offering an integrated approach to learning.

Initially, six teachers, each with more than 10 years' experience of teaching in mainstream and prison schools were interviewed. They were asked about their experience of prison school education and more specifically about the aspects of the young inmates' education that could be improved. Their responses were very illuminating, and the main issues highlighted by them are summarised below.

The Government-endorsed courses taught in prison schools are usually of one year or more in duration. Therefore, young inmates serving minimal sentences of a few months are unable to complete them. Teaching and learning in prison schools is often interrupted because inmates are obligated to fulfil administrative or procedural requirements, such as attending enrolment sessions or probation hearings. Syllabuses are frequently based on the ones used in schools, and consequently they are not necessarily suited to the needs of those whose priority is to find employment on their release.

Thus, the main areas of contention for the interviewees were with regard to the unsuitability of the existing education courses as well as their duration. As has been established, with over 90% of the juveniles detained in Malaysian prisons being first-time offenders, the majority are likely to be serving short term sentences of less than one year. The PPI rehabilitation programme, depending on the skills certification options taken, is likely to take at least two years, while government school examination syllabuses, such as those for PMR (3 years) and SPM (2 years) are unsuitable both in terms of their length and much of their content. Therefore, in the current scenario there is little likelihood of young inmates serving short sentences graduating from prison school.

The psychological impact of not being able to receive recognition for successfully completing a course of education could be devastating particularly for those young people who have already experienced disappointment – academic or otherwise – and who perceive themselves as failures. This may further exacerbate existing feelings of hopelessness and contribute to low self-esteem and depressive illness. It has been well documented that mental health issues are a significant factor in criminal behaviour. Approximately 60% of male Malaysian prisoners aged 18 to 20 have mental health problems, and the prevalence of mental illness for prisoners is 2–4 times higher than the rate in the general population (Relate Malaysia, 2016). The association between institutionalisation and poor mental health has been long established, frequently leading to a loss of agency and self-worth. A substantial portion of the prison population may have committed crimes due to poor mental health and these issues are only likely to be compounded by incarceration. Such undesirable outcomes run contrary to the stated aims of the PPI namely, to imbue inmates with the self-belief and confidence needed to overcome any adversity or difficulty they might encounter on their return to civil life.

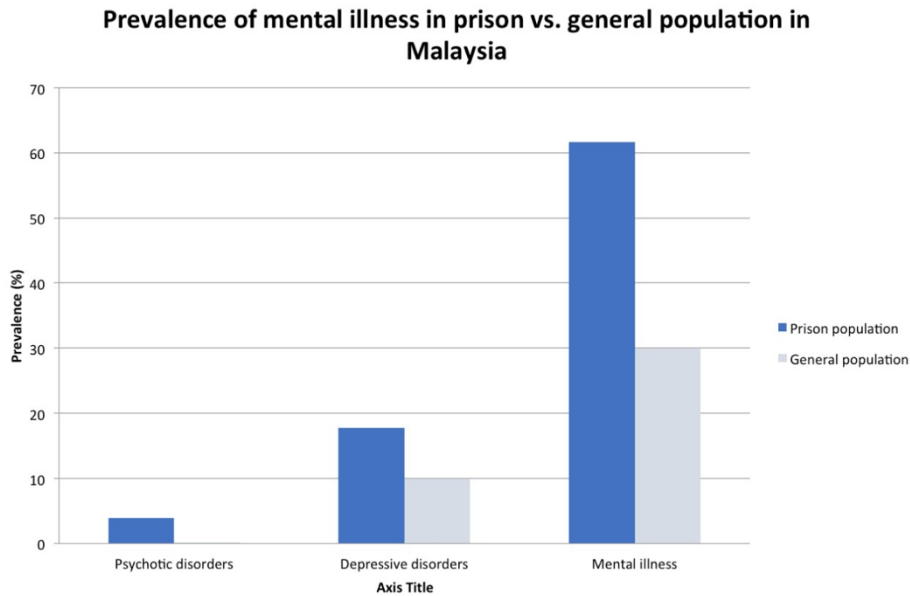


Figure 1: Bar chart showing prevalence of mental illness in prison vs. general population in Malaysia (Relate Malaysia, 2016)

Consequently, a need was identified for a new type of intensive course to complement the main rehabilitation programme, a course that teaches both practical and transferable skills, and which is designed to meet the needs of young inmates serving short sentences. After the interviews with the staff a list of key objectives was drawn up as follows:

1. To design a short, modular programme for young inmates that will give them the opportunity to satisfactorily complete a course of education and most importantly become certified, thereby boosting their self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities.
2. To design courses that fill gaps in the inmates' formal education resulting from interrupted and/or unfinished schooling and teach them a range of skills which will enable them to compete with others in the job market.
3. To design and develop a programme which will complement the aims of the prison rehabilitation programme to ensure that the inmates receive a well-rounded and comprehensive education by the time they leave prison.

### 3.1 Design and Development Phase

Evidently, many young inmates in correctional institutions or prisons suffer from poor mental health and low levels of self-esteem. Thus, it makes sense to employ the same humanistic and holistic principles – identity building and character reinforcement - that underpin the Human Development Plan in designing and developing intensive courses for juveniles. It is important for young inmates to realise that they have the capacity for change. This realisation is in itself

empowering. By learning new life skills, inmates are able to take charge of their lives, to develop self-agency and to let go of habitual and self-destructive ways of thinking and behaving. By adopting new life strategies, young inmates have a greater chance of breaking out of the cycle of crime and punishment that results from recidivism. Hence an appropriate term for such a course would be transformation modules. One important lesson that inmates need to learn is that others have similar experiences, feelings, and dilemmas as they do. In other words, they need to develop empathy through meaningful interaction with their peers, they are more likely to be able to manage their own negative thoughts and impulses (citation: virtues of empathy in combating depression, low self-esteem). Interaction is therefore the cornerstone for change.

One programme that was intended to have a transformative effect on inmates was the Learning Together Programme devised by the University of Cambridge in 2014. The premise for the programme was that change can only occur in an authentic social setting where acceptable modes of behaviour can be observed and learned. According to Armstrong, Ludlow, Obsuth & Lamour (2020), inmates experience considerable stigma in and outside prison and this can seriously hinder rehabilitation. However, social interactions between inmates and others can help eradicate prejudice and foster personal transformation (p.40). Under the programme, inmates and University of Cambridge students on the same MPhil course attended lectures and discussion groups together for the duration of the course. Based on feedback from the participants, the researchers compiled a list of qualities or attributes that had been considerably enhanced during the programme namely, the ability to see things from the perspective of others; self-esteem; the ability to make friends; and the confidence in one's ability to achieve goals (Armstrong et al, 2020, p.41-2). From participant feedback, it was made clear that the Learning Together programme had precipitated changes in modes of thinking and significant improvement in levels of self-esteem.

Another approach that could radically transform prison pedagogy is advanced within the African philosophical framework of Ubuntuism. According to this worldview, all things are interdependent: just as our mind, body and spirit are one, so our identities are forged through our relationships with others (whether living or departed), and our lives meaningless divorced from family, friends, and community. The philosophy is best summed up by the saying: "I am because of others" (cited in Chigangaidze, Matanga, & Katsuro, 2022). Thus, ubuntuism is a philosophical practice that is humanistic and which places great value on self-awareness, social responsibility, and compassion (Van Breda, 2019). Ubuntology is the educational system that derives its contents from the ubuntu philosophy: it preferences experience over book learning as a means of developing resilience against adversity, and acknowledges that students are more comfortable dealing with lesson tasks in their mother tongue or indigenous language rather than foreign languages, such as English (Omodan & Diko, 2021). Clearly, the emphasis on brotherly love and concern for others inherent in ubuntology has relevance to the lives of young inmates in Malaysian prisons. A prison community based on the principles of mutual care and concern is much more likely to be able to cope with the difficulties associated with incarceration.

A method of empowering students, which is in keeping with the ubuntu philosophy is to develop learning kit programmes. Che Ghani et al (2019) used learning kits to help mechanical engineering students understand the concept of renewable wind energy (p.240). A learning kit typically contains instructional tools in the form of visual, text and audio resources, sometimes together with models, which can be utilised by groups of students to lesson content more easily through autonomous and self-directed learning. Using learning kits is an effective way to combat passivity and disinterest in the classroom through appealing to students' innate desire to explore and investigate a topic for themselves without the pressure of having to come up with a



designated answer or a specific result (Nurhanim Saadah et al., 2013). Using such an approach may also be able to reduce self-consciousness, anxiety and stress.

After conducting the needs analysis and reviewing the literature, the researchers set about designing a short course for young inmates based on the principles of ubuntu and utilising the learning kits concept. One of the most important criteria was that the skills taught had to be of practical value to inmates on their release. Consequently, the following subjects were chosen for the pilot programme: Basic English-Speaking Skills, Job Hunting Skills and Employment Rights

Universiti Malaysia Sabah endorsed the course and agreed to issue certificates. A learning kit booklet was produced for each subject containing 10 lessons, of which only a core number is necessary for graduation. The lesson plans are essentially guidelines allowing for adaption, creativity, and individual learning in class to suit the needs of students of differing abilities and interests. Furthermore, lessons are standalone, i.e., comprehension is not dependent on knowledge taught earlier during the course. Each lesson is structured similarly containing a set of guidelines, instructions for a pair or group activity or task, a simple assessment rubric, and a section for reflection on what has been learnt. However, facilitators may modify lesson content as required by circumstances. Thus, the learning kits allow for a more open and organic approach to learning in keeping with ubuntu philosophy.

One of the learning kit modules, Job Hunting Skills states that the anticipated learner outcomes are that students will be exposed to job-seeking skills and career exploration, document writing for job applications, and preparation for job interviews. The titles of the 10 lessons that make up the module indicate the practical bias of the course: Career Path; Job-Hunting Skills; Social Network Account; Email; Resume; Cover Letter; Interview Types; Interview Preparation; Interview Questions; and Interview Etiquette.

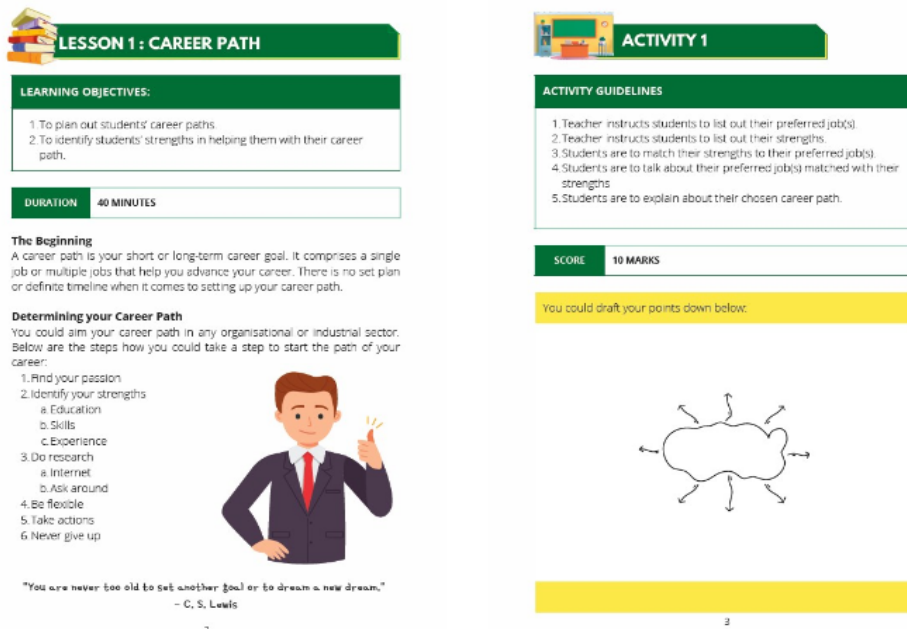


Figure. 2: Pages from Lesson 1 (Career Path) of the Job-Hunting Skills Learning Kit.

### **3.2 Implementation and Evaluation Phase**

On being approached by the UMS research team, the Malaysian Prisons Department agreed to enter into a collaboration aimed at furthering their aims of rehabilitating and reintegrating young offenders so that they can contribute to society (Malaysian Prison Department, 2021). They consented to allow a pilot teaching and learning programme - known hereafter as the Scholars Project and based on the learning kit modules - to be run at Kepayan Prison, Kota Kinabalu from April to September 2022. A total of 57 students within the prison school system aged between 16 and 20 years participated in the programme with educational attainment levels ranging from Primary 3 to SPM/Diploma. The largest groupings were of those who had reached Primary 6 (20 students) and Form 3 (19 students). All of the students were serving sentences of less than one year or were on remand. The three learning kit modules – Basic English-Speaking Skills, Job Hunting Skills, and Employment Rights - were conducted via one-hour weekly lessons at the prison library.

A mixed method impact assessment was conducted to determine whether this socially innovative programme had managed to transform the lives of the participants in terms of their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and ambitions. Quantitative data collected included information about educational history and sentencing duration, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews and surveys, whereby inmates were encouraged to recount their personal experiences of education in a prison school. Data were collected before and after the project implementation in 3 phases: Phase 1 (4 April -12 May); Phase 2 (18 July - 29 July); and Phase 3 (19 September - 6 October). The same questionnaire was distributed to the participants after each phase to assess the impact pre- and post-test. Responses were given to the following questions via a five-point scale ranging from very high to very low:

1. To what extent have you gained knowledge through this project?
2. To what extent has the knowledge you gained benefitted you?
3. To what extent has the knowledge you gained through this project added to your skills?
4. To what extent would you like to continue with this project?
5. To what extent would you like to build on the knowledge gained through this project by going to the next level of study?

### **4. Results**

In Phase 1 (4 April-12 May), the pre-test revealed that all 12 respondents had a low level of knowledge prior to participating in the Scholars Project. However, there was a significant change in the impact post-test: after six lessons, the responses to the questions were mostly 'very high' or 'high.' In the accompanying interviews, the students expressed their desire to run the project again saying that it should be extended in length so that they could further hone their skills. Likewise, in Phase 2 (18 July – 29 July) 100% of the 22 respondents stated that they had a low level of knowledge before entering the course in response to items 1,2, 4 & 5. Post-test, after 7 lessons, there was again a significant change in the impact: all the students chose 'very high' as their response to the questions. It was evident that they had benefited significantly from the knowledge gained and they showed both the inclination to continue with the Scholars Project and to take part in similar future projects. Finally, in Phase 3 (19 September – 6 October), the 23 respondents expressed either a moderate (87%) or low (13%) level of knowledge about the project prior to undertaking it. However, their responses to items 4 and 5 showed encouraging commitment to the project with 19 students selecting 'very high' for the former, and 18 students

selecting 'very high' for the latter. After 7 lessons, the post-test impact level was once again greatly altered with all the respondents selecting 'high' or 'very high' for each item.

## **5. Discussion**

Overall, the interview sessions revealed that the majority of the inmates were committed to improving themselves in terms of academic development and personal growth. The key issues that emerged during the discussions were the lack of financial resources, social stigma and the limitations imposed by prison life. Despite these challenges, the young inmates expressed their determination to improve their situation and this was demonstrated in their positive attitude towards the Scholars Project. Significantly, the students affirmed that the project had changed their perception of education for the better, and they now viewed learning as a vehicle for personal growth and development and acceptance back into society. They now looked to the future with more optimism. Various studies have indicated that extra-curricular educational programmes can restrict students' involvement in crime and improve their academic performance, and these are the aims of the Scholars Project as it seeks to transform the lives of young offenders through rehabilitation.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has shown that modular courses, such as the Scholars Project have the capacity to rejuvenate the lives of young inmates serving short sentences in Malaysian prisons. They are empowered by the realisation that these continuing education programmes can imbue them not only with practical work and life skills, but also importantly the confidence and self-belief that they will need to thrive on leaving prison and resuming life in mainstream society. The demand for such courses is clear: the current Ministry of Education syllabuses do not cater for the needs of those serving short sentences as they are based on the standard academic year. Consequently, there is demand for flexible and adaptable courses that can both complement the longer courses and offer a road to academic fulfilment for those whose stay in prison is fleeting (although still potentially devastating). Such programmes offer hope not only for the betterment of young offenders but also for the betterment of society as a whole.

Inevitably, this study has some limitations: the sample size was small for the implementation and evaluation phase. Furthermore, the participants in the study were all male. Clearly, the project needs to be replicated among a broader population that includes female and non-binary genders. Research into other aspects of young offenders' cognition and behaviour promises to yield fascinating results. Until then, the future looks bright due to the development of a new type of educational programme that offers hope and opportunity to young offenders serving minimal sentences in Malaysian prison schools.

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## **Authors Contributions**

The authors contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

## **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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