

CHALLENGES OF GRADUATES WITH HEARING DISABILITIES IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Norhayati Mat Yusoff

Department of Food Service and Management,

Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Department of Foodservice Management,

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Campus, 43200 Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: gs61735@student.upm.edu.my, norhayati@uitm.edu.my

Ungku Fatimah Ungku Zainal Abidin

Department of Food Service and Management,

Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: ungkufatimah@upm.edu.my

Siti Fatimah Mohamad

Department of Food Service and Management,

Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: s_fatimah@upm.edu.my

Wan Arnidawati Wan Abdullah

Department of Human Development and Family Studies,

Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: arnidawati@upm.edu.my

Roslinda Alias

Department of Education Studies,

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam Campus, 43200 Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: linda512@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The Malaysian government has provided educational opportunities to youths with hearing disabilities to raise their socio-economic status. This group has been provided with the necessary skills in selected institutions to fulfil significant roles in the country's economy, specifically in the hotel and food and beverage (F&B) industries. This effort corresponds with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which have greatly enhanced the rights of people with disabilities as they aim to raise the standard of living worldwide without leaving anyone behind. Despite higher education having the potential to break down barriers and make progress in promoting inclusivity in the institutions, youth with hearing disabilities who have completed their education still face obstacles in their pursuit of employment and career development in the hospitality workforce. Thus, this study explores the challenges of graduates with hearing disabilities who intend or are already working in the hospitality industry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine (9) informants who graduated with Certificates in Basic Culinary, Basic Pastry, or Hotel and Catering from four public institutions in Malaysia with the help of a professional sign-language interpreter. The data that was gathered was subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed communication barriers, discrimination, workloads, and co-workers are the challenges faced by graduates with hearing disabilities in the field of employment in the hospitality industry. The situation has left graduates feeling disappointed and undervalued in the industry. This study will aid hospitality educational institutions by allowing them to examine and modify their curriculum to meet industry standards. Besides, government funds provided to hospitality schools via the Ministry of Education help youth with hearing disabilities acquire knowledge and skills that will be valuable when they join the industry and contribute to the economy.

Keywords: *Hearing disability, challenges, communication barrier and hospitality industry*

INTRODUCTION

In the vibrant and dynamic landscape of the hospitality and restaurant industry, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all individuals, including those with disabilities, is vital. However, despite the progress in fostering workplace diversity, graduates with hearing disabilities continue to face significant challenges when seeking employment and navigating career paths within this industry. Hearing disabilities pose significant challenges for individuals in educational settings and the workforce, particularly in their ability to communicate and learn, which affect their access to opportunities and overall quality of life. In educational institutions, students with hearing disabilities may encounter barriers that hinder their academic progress and social integration. Similarly, in the workforce, these individuals face obstacles that can impede their employment prospects, career advancement, and workplace inclusion (Smith and Johnson, 2020). This presents a critical issue that needs to be addressed to ensure equal access to employment opportunities and promote diversity and inclusion within the hospitality sector, which calls for the crucial need to understand and address these issues for individuals with hearing disabilities.

People with disabilities (PwDs) frequently encounter substantial obstacles to secure employment, leading to reduced levels of engagement in the labour force, elevated rates of unemployment, and diminished pay in comparison to their non-disabled counterparts (Narayanan, 2018). They often face numerous obstacles when navigating the workplace, since they frequently meet hurdles that prevent them from fully participating and integrating into various businesses (Bonaccio, Connelly, Gellatly, Jetha, and Martin Ginis, 2020). The unique communication and accessibility need of individuals with hearing disabilities, in particular, are often overlooked, resulting in limited job prospects, barriers to career advancement, and a lack of inclusive work environments. Despite advances in accessibility and inclusivity measures, widespread prejudices, a lack of accommodations, and discriminatory practices continue to limit their professional opportunities (Garrick, Johnson, and Arendt, 2024; United Nation, 2016). In this setting, identifying and tackling the specific issues that PwDs confront in the workplace is critical. This calls for an examination of the constraints that impede their career chances and the need to create a more inclusive work environment that appreciates diversity and meets the needs of all employees (Kalargyrou and Costen, 2017).

In Malaysia, the government has equipped youth with hearing disabilities with the skills needed to play vital roles in the country's economy, particularly in the hospitality and food and beverage (F&B) industries (Yusoff et al., 2013; Adnan and Hafiz, 2012). Polytechnics and community colleges have run certificate and diploma programs that cater to youth with hearing disabilities since 2000, as these people have been found to be suitable for employment in these industries. This is also in line with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that seek to uplift people's standard of living without leaving anyone behind (Tah and Mokhtar, 2018). The government's development efforts are also extended to PwDs using an inclusive community approach. In the past ten years, there has been a significant increase in the number of students enrolling in two-year hospitality and F&B programmes at polytechnics, including those with disabilities (Department of Polytechnic Education, 2021). This suggests a rise in the number of hearing-impaired graduates who obtained credentials in these programmes.

Despite the government's provision of aid to this group, there is a considerable distance to be covered before people with disabilities are fully embraced and treated equitably in the workforce. A survey in the hospitality industry revealed challenges in identifying suitable job positions (Zahari et al., 2010). The authors found that, out of 123 respondents with hearing impairments, 35.7% were employed in hotels, 18% were worked in restaurants, 35.0% were employed in other industries, and 29.3% were jobless. According to Bonaccio, et al. (2020), the employment rate for PwDs in the US is far lower than that of the general population (76% vs. 34.9%). Meanwhile, the State Women, Family and Welfare Affairs Committee chairman said the recruitment of disabled workers including hearing disabilities in the country was still low at around 33% (Berita Harian Online, 2021). Although recruitment of disabled workers including hearing disabilities in the country is still low compared to without disabilities (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2021), graduates who work in the hospitality industry have been found to be loyal and committed to their jobs (Hui, Tsui and Tavitiyaman, 2021; Yusoff, Darimi, Zahari, Mustapha and Ghani, 2021). Uniquely, a large number of PwDs are capable and keen workers who can have a positive impact on their local communities (Waterhouse, Kimberley, Jonas and Glover, 2010). Besides, according to Groschl (2007), many disabled employees tend to show higher productivity and a low rate of absenteeism compared with their normal peers. Piramanayagam and Seal (2021) highlighted that PwDs rarely receive equal job opportunities and career advancement even after their rights and welfare have been legislated by governments worldwide. This prompts a crucial question of whether disabled graduates lack interest in securing employment or if companies are uninterested in hiring them. Additionally, other factors that exacerbate the PwD's situation in the real work environment should be explored.

Despite education opportunities given, disabled graduates still encounter certain obstacles in their pursuit of careers in the hospitality sector (Zahari, Yusof, Jamaluddin and Radzi, 2010). It is a fact that PwD face unique challenges and barriers entering or working in the industry. Hence, the government must act immediately to give PwDs equal employment opportunities since they, too, have a right to financial security, and the gap between their involvement in the workforce and that of those without disabilities is growing (The Star, 2020). There has been a wide array of studies conducted among university students without disabilities with a background in math and science to determine their career goals and expectations (Fouad and Smith, 1996; Fouad, Smith, and Enochs, 1997; Lopez, Lent, Brown, and Gore, 1997) career intention, career choice and career commitment for various areas of the industry, including entrepreneurship and the hospitality industry (Santos, Suzana, Liguori, and Eric, 2020; Teeuwis, Vicky, Brandon and David, 2020; Wen, Leung and Li, 2018; Rae, Woodler, David and Ruth, 2013). In addition, most existing studies on disabilities focused solely on examining the perceptions of managers (Hui, Tsui and Tavitiyaman, 2021; Wegscheider, Angela, Guevel and Renee, 2021; Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012; Jasper and Waldhart, 2013) customers (Kuo and Kalargyrou, 2014), employers (Morgan and Alexander, 2005) and industry/HR experts regarding disability inclusion (Bengisu and Balta, 2011) and the challenges among hearing impaired employees (Abbas, Faiza, Anis, Faisal Ayaz and Mohammad, 2019; Narayan and Selvin, 2018; Renee, 2009). However, little attention has been paid to explore the challenges faced by hospitality graduates with hearing disabilities. For this reason, this study aims to empirically investigate the challenges faced by graduates with hearing disabilities in entering or working in the hospitality and F&B industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Persons with Disabilities

A disability is defined as a denial or restriction of opportunities to participate in communal life as a result of a physical impediment (Goodley, 2016). According to Suryotrisongko, Kusuma, and Ginardi (2017), when a person suffers injuries to a section of his or her body, this makes it difficult for him or her to carry out typical activities. A broad category of impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions are included under the term "disabilities". Meanwhile, Lester and Nusbaum (2017) defined disability as a specific deficiency or flaw that can only be corrected by medical intervention or professional rehabilitation. Essentially, a disability is not solely a result of a medical condition. When a PwD deals with a complicated situation involving a specific part of

their body, they may also face psychological difficulties when engaging with others in the society. This causes concern as PwDs are still not receiving the same rights and needs as everyone else. As a result, they may face challenges in communicating and learning, and often suffer exclusion and marginalisation in everyday life (Bailey et al. 2015). According to Islam (2015), disability is one of the most overlooked and ignored development issues by state institutions and non-state players. The author added that this group of people has traditionally been viewed as a liability and as being dependent on welfare assistance.

Persons with Disabilities in the Hospitality Industry

In terms of employment among PwDs, according to the Labour Department as 31 July 2021, out of 1,373,485 employees working in government agencies, only 4,488 PwDs, or 0.33%, work in this sector. Meanwhile, 3,523 PwDs are working in the private sector across several types of industries (Khoo and Tiun, 2013). Discrimination against PwDs is a prevalent occurrence in the workplace and in promotions. It is worth highlighting that unemployed PwDs include students, seasonal workers, the disabled, the unemployed, the elderly, the unemployed but still looking for work, and domestic workers (Bengisu and Balta, 2011).

The hospitality industry in the United States is estimated to employ approximately half a million PwDs, representing 9.1% of the country's industrial workforce (Jasper and Waldhart, 2012). However, in Malaysia, Zahari et al. (2010) stated that only 35.7% of hotel and catering graduates with hearing disabilities were employed in the hotel industry. Entering the world of work is part of a major challenge for this group. This statement is supported by study conducted by Alia and Morris (2019), who found that these graduates are largely excluded from participation in the ordinary labour force because they are unable to cope with demands and stressors at the workplace.

Challenges of Persons with Hearing Disabilities in the Workforce

It is believed that there exist many challenges faced by the youth with disabilities to enter hospitality industry workforce. This can be clearly seen whereby many employers are believed to be very selective in the selection of workers and they prefer to choose graduates without disabilities compared to graduates with hearing disabilities (Yusof, Ali and Saleh, 2015). Workplace barriers include a lack of knowledge on the part of the employer about the performance skills of youths with disabilities and future employment issues, such as the lack of service and policy integration (Shaw, Daraz, Bezzina, Patel and Gorfine, 2014). Among the important work environment variables for individuals with disabilities include employer decisions, job content, integration and work culture, and job coaches. These factors are crucial for improving employment outcomes and sustaining competitive employment, especially in companies that pay special attention to their employees with disabilities (Ellenkamp, Brouwers, Embregts, Joosen and Weeghel, 2016). Likewise, this group should have equal access to jobs, as well as training and development opportunities, so that they can contribute to the growth and development of any nation (Khoo, Tiun, and Lee, 2013).

Social communication difficulties and professional anxiety are expected to affect students' hospitality career intentions. Graduates with hearing disabilities will feel anxious and lack confidence while communicating with non-disabled workers due to their communication barriers. Ang (2014), who conducted a study on the influence of organisational culture and management intent to hire the disabled, found that employers in Malaysia are still not convinced to accept PwDs. Entering the world of work is part of a major challenge for this group. The World Health Organisation identified several constraints, including workplace conditions and limited access to education and training. When employers show little to no faith in their employees' abilities and engage in discriminatory practices, it can lead to a hostile work environment for PwDs. As a way to ensure that PwDs have equal access to opportunities, this perspective should not be prevalent in the community.

According to Narayanan (2018), the needs and emotions of PwDs have been poorly understood. For example, employees with hearing disabilities may find it hard to converse and share information, especially when people around them do not know how to use sign language. This barrier will discourage them from communicating with other people, often causing them to become socially isolated. Hence, they are more confident to work on their own. However, solo job positions in the hospitality industry are few, as it mostly revolves around human interaction. They are forced to work with their disabilities to earn a living, which is stressful and impedes their true potential.

Social Model of Disability

Disabled people have created the social model of disability for the advantage of others (Kat Bailey, Harris and Simpsons, 2015). In a social model of disability, a person's disadvantage is associated with the combination of personal characteristics and social setting. This model has had an immense influence on academia, politics, and law since the 1970s (Samaha, 2007). The concept was born out of the 1975 political and intellectual debates that broke out between Disability Alliance and UPIAS (Shakespeare, 2006). In the late development stage of this model, Oliver (1990) stated that discrimination is a serious issue in society and this model seeks to assist the PwDs in standing up for their rights. From the point of view of the social model, disability is seen as an unfair situation caused by society that can be fixed by making big changes in the society (Lawson and Beckett, 2021). A new disability equality training was inspired by the social model that helped build the disabled peoples' movement that had begun a decade earlier and develop a common disability consciousness (Oliver, 2013). Mitra (2018) stated that based on the social model, a socially constructed world is what makes things hard for disabled people of all ages, not their disability itself. Furthermore, the social model is widely acknowledged as the most desirable and fundamental strategy and viewpoint for understanding the lives of individuals with disabilities (Levitt 2017).

Based on the social model, people are not disabled because of physical, mental, or communication disabilities, but rather because modern society has disregarded their needs and rights and erected obstacles in their path (Shakespeare, 2006). While the social

model has highlighted numerous obstacles for disabled workers in the global labour market, it has had very little effect on the hiring process because the proposed solutions have typically been predicated on an individual impairment model (Oliver, 2013). Besides, the social model of disability helps us recognise barriers that make life difficult for PwDs. In addition to putting them at a disadvantage, these obstacles make PwDs the target of discrimination and social exclusion.

Individuals with visual, auditory, and speech disabilities encounter communication obstacles that hinder their ability to read, write, and effectively express themselves. They have to struggle with different ways to comprehend things and make their points known to people around them, such as by using sign language, Braille and audio-visual aids. As this study is primarily focused on the PwDs, specifically those with hearing disabilities, this social model will support the breaking down of barriers and challenges that this group encounter when pursuing a profession in the hospitality or F&B industry.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative approach was used in this study to discover the challenges that graduates with hearing disabilities face in working or securing a job in the hotel and F&B industry in Malaysia. According to Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research is used as an iterative process in which new vital distinctions are made since the researcher becomes closer to the phenomenon being examined, leading to increased knowledge for the scientific community. Most of the time, qualitative methods are used in the tourism and hospitality industries to look into things like tourist spots, tourism organisations, travel agency owners, tour operators, stakeholders, and staff (Çakar & Şehmus Aykol, 2020). The qualitative approach produced in-depth results, even though it was challenging as the informants (i.e., graduate with hearing disabilities) were unable to communicate their opinions verbally. Specifically, the researcher used the case study qualitative design to obtain new insights regarding the subjects. One of the reasons for selecting the case study method is that it is a crucial instrument to investigate a process and understand a specific phenomena (Starman, 1997; Starman, 2013). There are three case study categories: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory (Yin, 2014). The explanatory case study was chosen as the researcher wanted to look at what might have caused certain things to happen.

Sampling and informant selection criteria

For this study, the homogeneous purposive sampling method was used, which meant that the interviewees were chosen primarily on the basis of certain criteria to achieve the study goal. A total of nine (9) graduates with hearing disabilities from the hospitality programme participated in the interview as informants. Only graduates with hearing disabilities who were employed or unemployed from the hospitality study programme from four higher education institutions (namely Johor Bahru Polytechnic, Arau Polytechnic, Kota Kinabalu Polytechnic, and Selayang Community College) were included in the study. The informants must have fulfilled the necessary educational qualifications, including Certificates in Hotel and Catering, Basic Pastry, and Basic Culinary Arts.

Data collection

Since this study involved graduates with hearing disabilities, a high level of collaboration from all stakeholders was required. Before conducting the data collection, permission was obtained from the Department of Polytechnic and Community College of the Higher Education Ministry in Putrajaya, Malaysia. A list of graduates with hearing disabilities who attended certificate courses in Basic Culinary, Basic Pastry, or Hotel and Catering at the Johor Bahru Polytechnic, Arau Polytechnic, Kota Kinabalu Polytechnic, and Selayang Community College was attained. Semi-structured interview questions were developed consistently with pre-determined questions to ensure uniformity of information collected. The questions were designed in an interactive way to bring out and develop a relaxing, friendly atmosphere, thus gaining high-quality information in the interview. With the assistance of a sign language interpreter to facilitate the interview process, data was gathered from nine interviews that were conducted with graduates with hearing disabilities from March 2023 until July 2023. The researcher reminded the graduates that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they had the option to exit the interview at any point and refuse to answer any questions. All information, including recordings and transcripts, was kept secure and confidential. A video recorder was utilised to record the interviews, and the interviewer also took notes to ensure that the conversation stayed on topic. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, with an average of around 45 minutes at the participants' place of employment. Those who were still unemployed preferred to have the interview at their previous institution of higher education at a time that was convenient for each participant. If the explanation was not clear, more inquiries were made to obtain clarification regarding their responses regarding the specific inquiry. Each participant underwent a single interview, and researchers later reached out to them for additional clarification and member validation. Table 1 presents the interview questions that covered the following main areas: (1) graduates' description of their background, programme and employment status; (2) descriptions of challenges faced entering or working in the industry; and (3) conclusion.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is important to justify the claim that the inquiry's findings deserve attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data's trustworthiness was evaluated based on four criteria: confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. To establish the credibility of the data, ample time was allocated for the collection of materials, conducting interviews, and verifying the findings with colleagues and experts. The transcribed transcripts were disseminated to the experts for evaluation. Four experts from academia (i.e specialising in hospitality education, foodservice and human resource, learning

disability, and inclusive learning) were selected to review the code and data interpretation. Besides, the researcher also received advice from two academicians and a sign language translator. As part of the member verification process, researchers shared the findings with the participants for their views and feedback. This procedure ensured that the participants' intended meanings were appropriately conveyed in the interpretations.

Ethical approval

The Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects approved the conduct of the investigation. Data collection began after obtaining ethical consent, as indicated by the ethical protocol number JKEUPM-2023-010.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Informants' profiles

Table 1 shows the profile of informants (n = 9) who participated in this study. Of the nine, five were male and four were female graduates. The informants' ages ranged between 21 and 39 years. As for their years of background graduation, only two of the participants were older than 10 years (2007 and 2012), and seven of them graduated between 2019 and 2022. Out of nine, five of the participants worked directly in the hospitality sector, and four were unemployed. Three of the nine participants (33.3%) previously attended the Kota Kinabalu Polytechnic, while three attended Selayang Community College. The other two participants were from the Arau Polytechnic and one was from the Johor Bahru Polytechnic. All informants who participated in this study were graduates with hearing disabilities from three (3) different programmes, including the two-year certificate programmes of Basic Culinary, Basic Pastry, or Hotel and Catering.

Table 1: Informants' Profile

No	Gender	Age	Graduation Year	Status of Employment	Previous Institute	Program Graduated
1	Female	26 years	2022	Not Working	Kota Kinabalu Polytechnic	Certificate in Hotel and Catering
2	Male	22 years	2022	Not Working	Kota Kinabalu Polytechnic	Certificate in Hotel and Catering
3	Male	22 years	2021	Not Working	Kota Kinabalu Polytechnic	Certificate in Hotel and Catering
4	Female	39 years	2007	Working	Johor Bahru Polytechnic	Certificate in Basic Pastry
5	Male	27 years	2022	Not Working	Arau Polytechnic	Certificate in Hotel and Catering
6	Male	23 years	2021	Working	Selayang Community College	Certificate in Basic Culinary
7	Male	21 years	2022	Working	Selayang Community College	Certificate in Basic Culinary
8	Female	23 years	2019	Working	Selayang Community College	Certificate in Basic Culinary
9	Female	23 years	2012	Working	Arau Polytechnic	Certificate in Hotel and Catering

Challenges Faced by Employees with Hearing Disabilities in Hospitality Workforce

The question asked to the hospitality graduates with hearing disabilities was, 'What are the challenges that you faced working in the hospitality workforce?' There were various responses from the informants. This industry comprised of food and beverage, travel and tourism, lodging and culinary. It is service-oriented, with a strong emphasis on human exchange in delivering the service. This is where communication plays a role in satisfying the customer. The majority of the informants claimed that they faced challenges entering the hospitality workforce. Those who were working in the hospitality industry claimed that they faced challenges such as communication barriers, workload, co-workers, and discrimination.

a. Communication Barrier

Every graduate recognised their challenges, including communication issues, in the hospitality workforce. Miscommunication often occurs between hospitality guests and special needs workers, especially those with hearing and speech disabilities. Employees with hearing disabilities may find communicating with clients, managers, and their colleagues challenging because they cannot process auditory signals and respond accordingly. Among the quotes from the informants are:

“My hearing problem prevents me from working in this field. For example, if I use this hearing tool, it's easier for me to get to work. I can't communicate well, but at least...if I can listen at least I can do better work.” (Graduate 6)

“When I couldn't find a job nearby, it was difficult because the boss didn't accept me and didn't want deaf people, so I tried to get help from the lecturers at the college to find a job for me. Now, I work as a cook at Monsterbytes Café, a café where I experience cooking Western cuisine and coffee.” (Graduate 7)

In addition, in the hospitality industry, where human interaction is widespread, many people rarely have the opportunity to work with a colleague with hearing disabilities, so they may feel awkward and unsure about how to approach such people. Deafness and hearing loss may also pose a challenge when the workers have to take instructions from their bosses. Graduate 7 said:

“Deaf and hearing disabilities person like me...when I go to work, I'm afraid the boss can't understand me when he talks to me. But...I dare myself so that people are confident with my skills and knowledge. Indeed, communication is an obstacle and a challenge for me to work in this field.”

Hearing disabilities can obstruct communication, particularly the capacity to understand emergency orders and training, which raises safety issues when hearing disabilities employees are required to operate machines or cookware.

b. Workload

Another challenge voiced by the informants is the substantial workload assigned to them. According to Narayanan (2018), challenges are faced by disabled people when employers and working colleagues find it difficult to understand their capability. The informant claimed that this industry gave them a heavy workload. They said:

“Regarding workload during my internship, I must do it myself when cleaning. So, I feel the heavy workload with my health problems at that time. Now, it is slowly recovering. Besides, I have communication problems with colleagues and guests because I have a hearing problem, so...I write.” (Graduate 1)

“Competing with ordinary people also involves education. At my workplace, achieving a high KPI is hard at my early employment stage. I have to do a lot of R&D and find a solution. Working shifts are different from working in the government sector. You should follow the company's program if you work in the private sector. Based on my personal experience, I am consistently requested to work more hours or other shifts in cases where there is a shortage of staff and the circumstances necessitate me to fulfil the tasks assigned by my supervisor.” (Graduate 4)

Graduate 8 noted that:

“It's not only the communication problem...and sometimes my manager bullies me. Always give me hard work. I always have to lift a huge pot, and there is something inside. There is gravity in it.”

She added:

“The challenge is that...I have to do my work alone. I wear a hearing aid. So... I have less problem in terms of communication.... because I can hear instructions. I was also told to work double shifts when there were not enough workers.”

c. Co-workers' treatment

The informants communicated about the treatment they faced in the organisation, where they were sometimes ignored by their co-workers who are non-disabled. Besides, the informants felt insecure due to their hearing disabilities to communicate with co-workers. Coworkers can have a beneficial or negative influence on others since they can offer people support and life experiences. This has affected their motivation to work in the environment. This is supported by the study conducted by Dunstan, Mortelmans, Tjulin, and MacEachen (2015), who highlighted that staff members reported higher levels of psychological happiness and productivity when they received encouragement and feedback from their coworkers. Their responses are:

“Some of the co-workers ignore me and reluctant to help me when I need them. This kind of treatment makes me feel not needed in the industry. Disable people should be given same treatment as other workers.” (Graduate 3)

“I am unable to communicate with other co-workers due to my disability and I feel insecure and unconfident to work in any organization due to my communication disability.” (Graduate 6)

"I am dedicated to my work during my working hours; however, my colleagues are unwilling to become friends with me. They disregard me." (Graduate 2)

It is commonly believed that biases and stigmas are prevalent among employers and coworkers with regards to the employment of PWDs (Groschl, 2007). According to Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha et al. (2020), when it comes to accepting PwDs in the job, coworkers who have PwDs in their families or among the people they know are more open and eager to embrace them. Peer pressure plays a significant role in determining the productivity of co-workers. Without support from co-workers, graduates with hearing disabilities will feel unappreciated and unhappy when working in that kind of environment.

d. Discrimination

Besides communication barriers, co-workers and the workload given to them, graduates with hearing disabilities claimed that discrimination is also one of the challenges that they experienced. An example is in securing employment in the workforce, despite possessing knowledge and skills in hospitality. Some of the responses are as follows:

"During training, I get an allowance monthly from the hotel, and I think it's easy to earn an income. Still, after I graduate in reality life, I find it difficult to get a job in any industry, although I have some knowledge and skills in housekeeping and cooking. I hope the industry gives people like me the same opportunities... get placements and job opportunities for us to survive." (Graduate 5)

Undoubtedly, these individuals encounter numerous challenges in their pursuit of employment. Ang (2014), stated that employers in Malaysia are still uncertain about the necessity of considering individuals with disabilities, as evidenced by the impact of organisational culture and the management's intention to engage the disabled. This group faces a significant hurdle when it comes to entering the workforce. Some graduates claimed that the employer did not believe in the ability of the disabled to work, and discriminates as a result. Their views are as follows:

"I always apply for work opportunities in restaurants and some hotels. But...no one wants to accept people like me yet. Hmmmm...it's hard to go here and there because of my hearing problem. I feel sad and disappointed." (Graduate 8)

In similar tone, Graduate 9 expressed that:

"People like me can work. No problem. But for example, the hotel I went to didn't want to accept me. Normal people are placed in the front, but... people like me are placed at the back, for example, housekeeping, bed making like that."

Furthermore, workers with disabilities frequently experience a pay gap that grows wider based on the severity of their condition (Metcalf, 2009). Studies found that these people will be offered lower wages compared to non-disabled workers. This may be considered as a form of discrimination because even though they are hired on a long-term basis, they are still be paid less than normal workers despite the fact that their qualifications and job responsibilities are equal (The Star, 2020). Some of them said:

"In my opinion...the salary I receive is quite low with my workload. Although I only work part-time, I was only paid 1 hour for RM9. But I don't have to work because I want to earn money." (Graduate 6)

"I like working in this hotel. I want to work in the kitchen, but I am not allowed. I have to work in housekeeping. So far, I am satisfied with my work. I think it's ok. But the salary is small." (Graduate 9)

In light of the results, it seems that communication barriers are a significant hurdle for many individuals in the hospitality industry, particularly employees with hearing disabilities. Despite their capability to communicate like anyone else, these barriers can limit their opportunities. Additionally, there seems to be a perception of slight discrimination within the hospitality organisations, which could further hinder their opportunities in the workforce. However, despite these challenges, the informants expressed a motivation to pursue careers where their contributions are appreciated and where they can find opportunities for growth and inclusion. It is crucial for hospitality organisations to address these barriers and create more inclusive environments to tap into the potential of these individuals.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to investigate the challenges encountered by the hospitality graduates with hearing disabilities in the hospitality industry, with focus on the F&B and hotels. The findings signify that the challenges encountered by hospitality graduates with hearing disabilities has influenced their career in the hospitality industry. The information gathered from the interviews provide evidence on the challenges faced by graduates with hearing disabilities, which included those wanting to enter the workforce, and those already established in their work. The main challenges faced by the interviewees include communication difficulties, heavy workload, co-workers, and discrimination. In term of communication barriers, it is obvious that graduates with hearing disabilities face difficulty in communicating with customers, co-workers and managers. This may affect productivity, and instructions are difficult to be given to this group.

The heavy workload working in the hospitality industry claimed by the informants has also been reported among hospitality graduates without disabilities in past duties. For example, physically exhausting repetitious duties, lengthy working hours, and low wages paid by the hospitality industry (Richardson & Butler, 2012; Neequaye & Armoo, 2014), poor work environments, boredom and poor work hours (Selçuk et al., 2013) reported in past studies have led to a negative perception towards the industry. In fact, it has been found that a large number of students that are studying in the field of tourism or hospitality choose to pursue professions different industries (e.g., banking, government, real estate). Only 10 to 20 percent of graduates remained in the hotel business after graduation (Song & Wang, 2008; Wong, Liu, & Bao, 2007; Wu, Morrison, Yang, Zhou, & Cong, 2014). The subpar working conditions, low wages, and tremendous pressure lead to the unfavourable attitude in gaining hospitality job among graduates in the hospitality industry, leading to low unemployment rates (Ahmad, Rashid & Shariff, 2014). However, although heavy workload was identified as a challenge in this study, the graduates with disabilities were found to be loyal and committed to working in the workforce. This has been claimed by past researchers, where compared to their peers without disabilities, PwDs typically have superior attendance records, a lower turnover rate, and longer tenure at their jobs (Chomka, 2004; Groschl, 2007; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008; Hui et al., 2021).

Next, discrimination is very common among PwDs in many situations, especially when entering the workforce. According to Abbas et al. (2019), employers are reluctant to take any persuasive measure for promoting decent employment for hearing impaired persons, and they do not abide by the provision of job quotas for people with hearing disabilities. PwDs are not a new target of discrimination. Discrimination is a persistent issue that all PwDs face and strive to overcome. However, a paradigm shifts from a "charity" to a "human rights" approach is required to accommodate the growing knowledge and recognition of the role, contribution, and future of PwDs in society. Discrimination against people with impairments is nothing new and has persisted for a long time (Purdie, 2009). Despite being regarded and handled differently, individuals with disabilities face challenges in achieving the same level of acceptance as the majority of their non-disabled counterparts. Hence, the capacity of individuals to engage in society in a meaningful way has been hindered by discrimination. Opportunities, choices, and results that shape people's well-being are similarly impacted (United Nation, 2017).

The results from this study suggest that there are barriers to develop less strenuous working conditions for graduates with hearing disabilities. There seems to be a lack of prerequisites for exploiting managers' room for manoeuvring the process of adjusting the workplace. The difficulties that people in the workforce experience must be recognised and addressed if we are to build a more inclusive society. To avoid discrimination, creating an environment where people feel valued, empowered, and given equal opportunities to contribute their unique skills and perspectives in the workforce is crucial by tackling attitudinal barriers, enhancing accessibility, expanding job opportunities, offering support and accommodations, and challenging stereotypes. To overcome communication challenges, measures should be implemented to enhance accessibility in both educational institutions and workplaces. This includes providing captioning services for lectures and meetings, installing visual alarms and signalling devices, and ensuring that digital content and communication platforms are compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers.

In terms of co-workers' challenges faced by the graduates with hearing disabilities, treatment from the co-workers also make employees with hearing disabilities feel isolated when working in the organisation. Lengnick-Hall et al. (2008) revealed that one of the reasons why employers hesitate to hire employees with disabilities is that they believe PwDs will affect the morale and productivity of other normal workers. Naraine and Lindsay (2011) also found that employers choose not to include PwDs as part of their workforce because they may create negative working environment and lower level of social togetherness at workplace. Hence, training programmes can be offered to raise awareness and promote understanding of hearing disabilities among staff and peers. Sensitivity training can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for graduates with hearing disabilities to foster empathy and reduce stigma.

Educational institutions can increase access to support services that are tailored to the needs of graduates with hearing disabilities. This may include providing sign language interpreters, note-taking assistance, and access to assistive listening devices. Additionally, mentorship programmes and career counselling services specifically designed for individuals with hearing disabilities can be offered to help them navigate the transition from academia to the workforce more effectively. Moreover, educational institution can create opportunities for graduates with hearing disabilities to network with employers, industry professionals, and other individuals with similar experiences. This can help expand their professional network, increase their visibility in the job market, and provide valuable insights into career opportunities and pathways. Policies and practices that promote equal employment opportunities for individuals with hearing disabilities can also be advocated. This includes enforcing anti-discrimination laws, providing reasonable accommodations in the workplace, and actively recruiting and hiring individuals with disabilities. This can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for graduates with hearing disabilities, enabling them to fully participate and succeed in both educational and professional settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hiring hospitality graduates with hearing disabilities may help the industry overcome the high employee turnover and labour shortage that is predominant in restaurants and hotels. The findings imply that there is opportunity for industry players to hire this special group as many of them are actively seeking jobs. Punch (2016) recommended that in order to create supportive work environments, human resource experts, organisations, and managers must recognise their responsibilities. Providing jobs to these people also allows organisations to fulfil their corporate social responsibility to the disabled community. From the institutional perspective, it is beneficial for organisations to come up with a curriculum to meet industry requirements and students' interest. Special programmes have been offered at higher-learning institutions for hearing-impaired youths to hone their skills and meet the demands of working in various industries. With the expertise and skills given to this special youth group, they can be offered the opportunity to contribute to the country's economy by joining the workforce.

This study also has significant implications to the government, particularly the Ministry of Human Resource and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. These two ministries have an important legal role as “guardians” of the welfare and wellbeing of PwDs. They can impose stricter monitoring processes on all industry practitioners to comply with the Disability Act 2008, which gives equal opportunities to PwDs and uplift their quality of life. On top of that, the collaborative efforts between hospitality institutions, industry practitioners and the Ministry of Human Resource should continuously be held. These efforts, in the long run, will ensure that the government’s allocation and intention of giving equal opportunities in education, employment and curbing of discriminatory practices, especially against graduates with hearing disabilities, could be achieved.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the challenges encountered by graduates with disabilities in navigating the transition from academia to the workforce are multifaceted and significant. Despite advancements in legislation and awareness, these challenges persist and often exacerbate the already existing disparities in employment outcomes between individuals with and without disabilities. Moreover, it is evident that the unique needs and experiences of graduates with disabilities are often overlooked or marginalised in discussions surrounding workforce inclusion and diversity. This oversight not only hinders the full realisation of their potential but also perpetuates total inequalities within our society. Moving forward, it is imperative for stakeholders at all levels, including policymakers, employers, educators, and disability advocates, to collaborate in addressing these challenges effectively. This entails implementing proactive measures such as enhancing accessibility, providing tailored support services, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and promoting equal opportunities for career advancement. Therefore, it is essential to assign suitable career paths to support graduates as they enter employment in the hospitality sector.

Fostering partnerships between educational institutions, disability service providers, and employers can facilitate smoother transitions for graduates with disabilities into the workforce. By leveraging resources, expertise, and best practices, we can create more inclusive and equitable pathways to employment for all individuals, regardless of their abilities. In essence, while the challenges faced by graduates with disabilities are difficult, they are not unmanageable. By acknowledging the distinct talents and abilities of these individuals and collaborating to eliminate obstacles, we may establish a society that is more varied, inclusive, and profitable for all. The current study has a number of limitations that merit consideration in future analyses. Given that it concentrates on the challenges faced by graduates with hearing disabilities, future research could include graduates with other forms of disability that are accepted for employment in the field of hospitality. Because this study only focuses on challenges faced by graduates with hearing disabilities; the researcher suggests conducting subsequent research that explores the impact of the motivation factor and expectations of the graduates on their careers before graduation.

Next, further research can include quantitative methods to study and obtain generalised data on hospitality students with hearing disabilities that may include variables such as interest and self-efficacy on their intention to work in the hospitality industry. Finally, it is recommended that future studies explore the opportunity and value of recruiting graduates with impairments in the Malaysian workforce as another avenue of research. Indeed, research in this area is needed to determine the strategies to help this group of people to enter the employment force for their socio economy.

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