From Classroom to Community: Developing Student Job Coaches for Persons with Disabilities through Human Resource Management Education

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ABSTRACT

Persons with disabilities (PWD) remain under-represented in the Malaysian workforce, and a shortage of trained job coaches is a recurring barrier to their sustained employment. Human Resource Management (HRM) programmes are well placed to help address this gap, yet little is known about how HRM students learn from community-based exposure to disability-inclusive employment. This qualitative exploratory study examined how a community-engaged job coach learning initiative, delivered with ENOKU, a Malaysian social enterprise, shaped the professional learning of undergraduate HRM students. The initiative comprised two ENOKU-facilitated sessions held over approximately five hours on one day in May 2026: an open session on ENOKU's social enterprise journey and a focused session preparing Social Talent Ambassadors to support inclusive employment. All 15 Year 1 to Year 3 students who completed the activities, submitted a seven-question online reflection and consented to the use of their responses formed the sample. Reflections were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, with inductive coding followed by interpretation through Kolb's experiential learning theory and intergroup contact theory. Credibility was supported through a coding matrix, an audit trail, peer review of themes and researcher reflexivity. Six themes emerged: reconceptualising job coaching as holistic, individualised support; moving from deficit-based to strength-based views of PWD; developing respectful empathy, patience and adaptive communication; strengthening transferable HR competencies; connecting classroom knowledge with community practice; and developing aspirations for inclusive HR practice. The findings suggest that structured community engagement combined with guided reflection can support disability-inclusive HR learning, although they reflect self-reported perceptions gathered shortly after the programme. The study offers implications for teaching recruitment and selection, HRM curriculum design and university–social enterprise partnerships.

Keywords: Job coaching, persons with disabilities, inclusive employment, recruitment and selection, experiential learning

INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities (PWD) remain among the most under-represented groups in labour markets worldwide. The World Health Organization (2022) estimates that about 1.3 billion people, or 16 percent of the global population, experience significant disability, and working-age PWD are disproportionately excluded from formal employment (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). In Malaysia, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685) recognises the right of PWD to access employment on an equal basis with

others (Laws of Malaysia, 2008), and the government has long set a target of one percent of public-service posts for PWD. Actual participation, however, remains far below this target: PWD made up only 0.3 percent of the public-service workforce in 2022 (United Nations Development Programme Malaysia [UNDP Malaysia], 2024). Employer reluctance, limited workplace accommodation and a shortage of trained job coaches are frequently cited as barriers to sustained employment (OKU Rights Matter, 2025; Zainuddin, 2025).

Job coaching, the practice of providing individualised, on-site and ongoing support that helps a person with a disability obtain and sustain "real work for real pay," is a core mechanism of supported employment (Wehman et al., 2007). Yet the supply of trained job coaches in many countries, including Malaysia, remains limited, and coaching is sometimes performed without formal preparation in task analysis, workplace accommodation or structured communication (Zainuddin, 2025). Higher education institutions, and HRM programmes in particular, are well positioned to help close this gap. HR practitioners make the recruitment, selection and job-design decisions that determine whether PWD are hired and retained, and employer concerns about PWD arise at every stage of the employment cycle, from recruitment and selection to accommodation and retention (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Embedding students in structured, community-based job coach learning exposes them both to disability-inclusive HR practice and to the relational competencies of empathy, patience and communication that underlie effective people-development work.

A substantial body of research shows that guided contact with PWD can change the attitudes of non-disabled students (Beunza-García et al., 2025; Wozencroft et al., 2015). Much of this evidence, however, comes from education, health and recreation settings. Less attention has been given to business and HRM students, who will later make decisions about recruitment, job design, training and workplace accommodation, and evidence from Malaysia, where university–social enterprise partnerships in inclusive employment are still emerging, remains scarce.

This study responds to that gap by exploring the developmental outcomes of a job coach learning and inclusive employment initiative for Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) (Human Resource Management) (BBAHRM) students at a private university in Malaysia. The initiative was anchored by sharing sessions conducted by ENOKU, a Kuala Lumpur–based social enterprise that connects PWD with employers through skills assessment, disability-awareness training, job placement and ongoing workplace support (ENOKU, 2025). By examining students' written reflections, the study seeks to understand how the experience shaped their understanding of job coaching, their assumptions about PWD and their emerging orientation as future HR practitioners. In doing so, it responds to the need for HRM education to translate classroom knowledge, particularly in recruitment and selection, into practice-ready, inclusion-oriented competence.

Research Questions

The study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How do HRM students describe their understanding of job coaching before and after participating in a community-engaged job coach learning initiative?

RQ2: What perceived shifts in assumptions about the employment capabilities of PWD are reflected in students' written accounts?

RQ3: How do students connect the experience to HRM knowledge, particularly recruitment and selection, transferable professional competencies and their aspirations for inclusive HR practice?

The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature and theoretical framework, describes the methodology, presents the six themes, and discusses their implications for HRM education, before outlining limitations and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HRM Education, Experiential Learning and Community Engagement

HRM education aims to prepare students to make sound decisions across the employment cycle, including job analysis, recruitment, selection, training and employee relations. Because many of these decisions involve judging people's capabilities and their fit with a role, classroom instruction alone may leave students' assumptions untested; community engagement places students in structured contact with real employment needs. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) offers a natural framework for this pedagogy: learning proceeds cyclically through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Within this view, reflection on practice is central not only to individual development but also to the transfer of classroom theory into workplace-ready competence.

Job Coaching and Supported Employment

A job coach supports an individual with a disability in finding and maintaining "real work for real pay," while also representing the value of that individual to an employer (Wehman et al., 2007). The role is deliberately dual-facing: job coaches conduct job analyses, provide systematic on-site instruction, fade support as the employee becomes independent and maintain ongoing follow-up with both worker and employer. Because the role blends technical, relational and advocacy skills, effective job coaching requires structured preparation; where such preparation is absent, coaching risks becoming ad hoc or overly directive rather than genuinely capacity-building (Zainuddin, 2025).

Inclusive Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment and selection are critical points at which PWD may be excluded from employment. Bonaccio et al. (2020) reviewed employer concerns across the employment cycle, including doubts about the productivity of PWD and the cost of accommodation, and showed that many of these concerns are not supported by the available research evidence. Job coaching overlaps closely with core recruitment and selection activities: job analysis clarifies the essential tasks of a role, job matching links a candidate's strengths to those tasks, and accommodation adjusts the role or environment so that a capable candidate can perform it (Wehman et al., 2007). Exposure to job coaching may therefore help future HR practitioners design recruitment and selection processes that assess what candidates can do, rather than screening them out on the basis of assumptions about disability.

Employment of Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia

Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Act 685) established a rights-based framework for PWD, including equal access to employment (Laws of Malaysia, 2008). Implementation, however, has lagged. PWD accounted for only 0.3 percent of the public-service workforce in 2022, well short of the one-percent target (UNDP Malaysia, 2024), and private-sector uptake is constrained by employer perceptions of accommodation cost, a perceived shortage of qualified candidates and limited knowledge of disability-inclusive hiring (Zainuddin, 2025). Community organisations have called for expanded, better-trained job coaching capacity as one lever for narrowing this gap (OKU Rights Matter, 2025), and social enterprises such as ENOKU have emerged to fill part of this space by offering employers skills assessment, disability-awareness training and ongoing workplace support for PWD placements (ENOKU, 2025). University HRM programmes, working alongside such social enterprises, therefore represent a plausible but currently underused pipeline for expanding job coaching capacity.

Contact-Based Experiential Learning and Attitude Change toward Disability

A substantial body of research indicates that structured, supervised contact with PWD can shift the attitudes of non-disabled participants. In a systematic review of intervention studies published between 2013 and 2024,

Beunza-García et al. (2025) found that direct, well-structured contact, particularly under equal-status conditions, was a critical factor in producing positive attitude change toward people with intellectual disabilities. Dole et al. (2025) reached a complementary conclusion in a systematic review of indirect contact and knowledge-based interventions across child and adult populations. Study-level evidence is consistent with these reviews: Wozencroft et al. (2015) found that college students' attitudes toward youth with disabilities changed significantly over a semester-long service-learning course that combined lectures with direct, supported contact at a therapeutic camp, with changes measured both after classroom instruction and after the camp experience. Wüthrich et al. (2024), however, caution that such gains are often more pronounced for explicit than for implicit attitudes, suggesting that brief contact experiences may shift what participants report believing more readily than the automatic associations underlying those beliefs.

This pattern is consistent with theoretical accounts of empathy as a capacity that develops through perspective-taking and repeated, guided exposure to another person's situation (Bird & Viding, 2014). In a scoping review of virtual reality interventions intended to inform disability support worker training, Trevena et al. (2024) found that such interventions mostly enhanced empathy-related outcomes, with perspective-taking the mechanism most often credited, although the authors regarded the evidence as preliminary. In workplace terms, empathy is also recognised as a core social competence that underpins effective relationships with colleagues and clients (Goleman, 1998). Together, this literature suggests that a job coach learning experience combining instruction with direct, guided contact is well positioned to shift deficit-based assumptions about PWD toward strength-based ones, while building the empathic and communicative competencies central to HR practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on two complementary perspectives. The first is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which explains how learners transform experience into knowledge by moving from concrete experience to reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The second is intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), which proposes that contact between groups reduces prejudice most effectively when it involves equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support. In this study, the ENOKU sessions and related community activities provided the concrete experience and structured contact with inclusive employment practice; the structured written reflection prompted reflective observation; and students' linking of the experience with HRM concepts represented abstract conceptualisation. Students' stated intentions for future practice offer an early indication of the active experimentation stage. Institutional support for the activity, through the university, the student society and the social enterprise partner, corresponds to one of Allport's key conditions for positive contact.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to understand how undergraduate HRM students interpreted their experiences of job coach learning and disability-inclusive community engagement. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on students' personal understanding, attitude development and reflections on professional practice rather than on measuring predetermined learning outcomes (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study was informed by a social constructivist perspective, which views learning and meaning as being developed through experience, interaction and reflection. Written reflections were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Because the reflection activity was already incorporated into the programme as a structured learning debrief, it provided an opportunity to examine students' accounts in their own words without requiring additional interviews.

Programme Context

The programme was conducted on 17 May 2026 as a collaborative initiative between the HRM Society, the student club representing the BBAHRM programme, and the Social Talent Ambassador initiative at a private university in northern Peninsular Malaysia. Both sessions were held on the same day, with a total duration of approximately five hours. The programme consisted of two related sessions facilitated by ENOKU, a Malaysian social enterprise that promotes inclusive employment by connecting PWD with suitable employment opportunities and supporting employers in developing more inclusive workplace practices.

The first session, titled *"From Idea to Impact: The ENOKU Social Enterprise Journey in Creating Opportunities for All,"* was open to all university students, although most participants were from the BBAHRM programme. The session introduced ENOKU's development as a social enterprise, its social mission and its efforts to create meaningful employment opportunities for PWD. It also exposed students to the role of social enterprises in addressing employment inequality and in responding to gaps that may not be adequately addressed by conventional organisations.

The second session, titled *"Learning from ENOKU: Equipping Social Talent Ambassadors to Support Inclusive Employment Practices,"* was conducted specifically for students appointed as Social Talent Ambassadors. This smaller and more focused session aimed to prepare the ambassadors to support disability-inclusive employment initiatives within the university and the wider community. Students were introduced to the practical responsibilities involved in supporting PWD, including understanding individual strengths and support needs, communicating respectfully, avoiding assumptions, identifying workplace barriers and promoting fair employment opportunities.

Together, the two sessions provided both a broad understanding of social enterprise and a focused introduction to inclusive employment support. The first session established the organisational and social context of ENOKU's work, while the second encouraged Social Talent Ambassadors to consider how they could translate this understanding into practical community and employment-related support.

Participants

The participants were 15 undergraduate students enrolled in the BBAHRM programme at a private university in northern Peninsular Malaysia, comprising Year 1, Year 2 and Year 3 students. The analytic sample included all students who completed the relevant job coach learning activities, submitted the reflection form and consented to the anonymous use of their responses for academic research and publication. Participation in the research component was voluntary, and students were informed that their decision would not affect their academic standing. The inclusion of students from different years of study provided a range of perspectives: some had already completed several HRM courses, while others were at an earlier stage of developing their understanding of recruitment, training, employee development and workplace inclusion.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured online reflection form administered after the learning activities. The form contained seven open-ended questions designed to encourage students to reflect on their learning before and after the programme. The questions explored students' previous understanding of job coaching, their understanding after the programme, changes in their views of the employment capabilities of PWD, and their learning about empathy, patience and communication. Students were also asked to identify the skills they had developed, explain how the experience related to their HRM classroom learning, and reflect on how it might influence their future professional and community roles.

Students submitted their responses within a five-day period in July 2026. No minimum or maximum response length was imposed, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Before analysis, names, student identification numbers, email addresses and other identifying details were removed from the dataset.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. First, the researchers read the reflections several times to gain familiarity with the overall content and to identify recurring ideas, and initial notes were made regarding students' understanding of job coaching, attitudes toward PWD, interpersonal learning, HR-related skills and professional aspirations.

In the second phase, meaningful segments of the responses were assigned initial codes. Coding was primarily inductive and remained close to the participants' language. Examples of early codes included *continuous support*, *individualised guidance*, *capability rather than disability*, *avoiding assumptions*, *adapting communication*, *applying recruitment knowledge* and *becoming an inclusive HR practitioner*.

The codes were then compared and grouped into broader categories, and related categories were developed into preliminary themes that were reviewed against the complete set of reflections. Overlapping themes were combined, while themes that were too broad were refined to provide clearer distinctions. The final themes were defined and named according to the central pattern of meaning they represented.

Theory informed the analysis in two ways. Coding was first conducted inductively, so that categories emerged from students' own language rather than from predetermined constructs. In the later phases of reviewing, defining and interpreting the themes, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Allport's (1954) conditions for positive intergroup contact were used as sensitising lenses: each theme was examined for the stage of experiential learning it evidenced and for the contact conditions that appeared to support it (Table 2). This allowed the frameworks to guide interpretation without forcing the data into fixed categories.

A structured coding matrix was used to organise participant responses, initial codes, categories and supporting quotations. To strengthen the credibility of the interpretation, the developing themes were discussed with another academic familiar with HRM and qualitative research. The purpose of this peer review was not to calculate statistical agreement but to examine whether the themes were clearly defined, supported by the data and relevant to the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. For credibility, the analysis remained closely grounded in the students' original responses, direct quotations were used to show how each theme was developed, and themes were reviewed with a peer. The themes were checked against the complete dataset rather than only selected positive responses, and attention was given to responses that were less detailed or that reflected different levels of learning. For dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was maintained through the coding matrix, which documented the movement from original responses to initial codes, categories and final themes. For transferability, the programme context and participants are described in detail so that readers can judge the relevance of the findings to their own settings.

The researchers also reflected on their positionality. The first author is Head of Programme for the BBAHRM programme, advises the Social Talent Ambassador initiative and helped organise the activity. This position created a possible power relationship with participants, who might have felt inclined to write favourable reflections. Several steps were taken to reduce this influence: reflections were submitted online after the activities rather than in person; students were assured that their decision to participate would not affect their grades; identifying details were removed before analysis; and each theme was required to be supported by multiple participant accounts and was reviewed for consistency with the complete dataset, including less positive or less detailed responses.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and students gave informed consent for the anonymised use of their written reflections for academic research and publication. Students were informed that participation or non-participation

would not affect their grades or their relationship with the university. All identifying information was removed before analysis, and participants were assigned codes from P1 to P15.

FINDINGS

The analysis produced six related themes reflecting changes in students' understanding, attitudes, competencies and professional aspirations (Table 1). These themes do not represent entirely separate forms of learning. Rather, they show a gradual movement from understanding the technical role of a job coach to developing more inclusive views of PWD and recognising the responsibilities of future HR practitioners.

Table 1: Summary of Themes Emerging from Students' Reflections

Theme	Reported development	Illustrative participants
1. Reconceptualising job coaching	From viewing job coaching as basic training or interview preparation to recognising it as continuous, individualised and relational support	P3, P6
2. Reframing assumptions about PWD	From focusing on limitations to recognising ability, potential and the importance of appropriate opportunities	P5, P9, P11
3. Developing empathy, patience and adaptive communication	From offering general assistance to listening, asking before helping and adapting support to individual needs	P6, P7, P8
4. Strengthening transferable HR competencies	Development of communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving and project-management skills	P3, P7
5. Connecting classroom knowledge with community practice	Application of training, recruitment, needs assessment, diversity and inclusion concepts in a practical setting	P7, P8, P10
6. Developing an inclusive professional orientation	Growing aspiration to practise HR in a fair, supportive and disability-inclusive manner	P4, P11, P15

Theme 1: Reconceptualising Job Coaching as Holistic and Individualised Support

Many participants entered the programme with a limited understanding of job coaching. Some viewed it mainly as teaching employees how to perform a task, while others associated it with preparing job seekers for interviews and helping them write résumés. These views were not incorrect, but they reflected only a small part of the job coach's role.

After the programme, students described job coaching as a longer and more individualised process. P3 explained that it involved "continuous guidance, encouragement, adapting to individual needs, and helping persons with disabilities build confidence and become more independent." P6 similarly described a step-by-step process involving assessment of the individual and the workplace, job matching, training, workplace support and follow-up.

Students also began to recognise that job coaching should not create dependency; instead, support should be gradually adjusted as the employee develops confidence and independence. This mirrors the supported-employment literature, which presents job coaching as an ongoing relationship that responds to the needs of both employee and employer, with support faded over time, rather than as a one-time training activity (Wehman et al., 2007).

Theme 2: Moving from Deficit-Based to Strength-Based Views of Persons with Disabilities

Several participants acknowledged that, before the programme, they had underestimated the ability of PWD to participate in employment. Some believed that PWD would require constant assistance, while others assumed that they might not be able to perform work at the same level as other employees.

Following the experience, students reported paying greater attention to individual strengths, skills and potential. P5 explained, "Before, I thought they needed a lot of help. Now I see they can do many things well if given the chance." P9 similarly stated that the programme taught students to focus on "what a person can do instead of what they cannot do."

A particularly important observation came from P11, who noted that PWD may possess the skills, motivation and ability to work but remain excluded because of employer bias, inaccessible recruitment processes and limited workplace accommodation. This suggests that some students moved beyond viewing disability as an individual limitation and began to recognise the organisational and environmental barriers that restrict employment opportunities.

Theme 3: Developing Respectful Empathy, Patience and Adaptive Communication

Participants described empathy as more than feeling sympathy for PWD. Their reflections showed a growing awareness that support should be respectful, individualised and guided by the person receiving it. P8 explained that she learned to "ask how someone wants to be assisted instead of just assuming what they need." This reflects a movement from providing help based on personal assumptions to listening to the preferences of the individual. P6 also cautioned that excessive sympathy could make PWD feel that they were being treated differently from others.

Patience was frequently connected to communication. Students recognised that individuals may communicate, understand instructions or complete tasks at different paces. P7 highlighted the need to speak directly to the individual and to remain patient with different communication styles. These reflections suggest that students developed a practical form of empathy based on listening, respect and adjustment rather than pity or overprotection.

Theme 4: Strengthening Transferable HR Competencies

The programme also helped students recognise competencies relevant beyond disability-related employment. Participants identified communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, interpersonal skills and project management as important areas of development. P3 described learning "communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and interpersonal skills," while P7 highlighted the project-management and coordination skills required during the community activity. Other participants emphasised the importance of adjusting communication to the needs of different individuals.

These competencies are central to HR practice, because HR professionals regularly work with employees who have different backgrounds, abilities, expectations and support needs. The programme therefore gave students an opportunity to practise skills that could later be applied in recruitment, training, employee relations and workplace development.

Theme 5: Connecting Classroom Knowledge with Community Practice

Students frequently connected the programme with concepts they had studied in their HRM courses, including training and development, motivation, recruitment and selection, diversity management, equal employment opportunity and employee needs assessment. P10 described seeing how recruitment, selection and diversity management operate in practice, while P8 related the activity to needs assessment by considering the areas in which an employee might require additional development or support. P7 noted that classroom knowledge about capacity building became clearer when it was applied to real people and community needs.

These reflections indicate that students understood the programme as more than a volunteer activity: it gave them an opportunity to apply academic concepts in a practical and socially meaningful context. In terms of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, the activity provided a concrete experience, while the reflection process helped students observe, interpret and connect that experience with previously learned concepts.

Theme 6: Developing Aspirations for Inclusive HR Practice

Many participants concluded their reflections by considering how the programme might influence their future roles as HR practitioners. Their responses reflected a growing desire to support fair employment practices and to create workplaces in which employees are valued according to their capabilities. P4 expressed an aspiration to help create supportive workplaces where PWD have opportunities to succeed and grow. P11 stated that the programme encouraged her to become a more inclusive and socially responsible HR practitioner, and P15 hoped to contribute to workplaces where individuals are respected for their abilities and given fair opportunities regardless of disability or background.

These responses should be understood as emerging professional aspirations rather than evidence of a fully developed professional identity. Nevertheless, they indicate that the programme encouraged students to regard inclusion as part of their future HR responsibilities rather than as a separate charitable or community concern.

Table 2 summarises how each theme relates to the stages of Kolb's (1984) cycle and to the conditions for positive contact identified by Allport (1954).

Table 2: Themes Interpreted through the Theoretical Framework

Theme	Experiential learning stage (Kolb, 1984)	Contact condition or mechanism (Allport, 1954)
1. Reconceptualising job coaching	Reflective observation leading to abstract conceptualisation of the job coach role	Direct exposure to practitioners engaged in inclusive employment
2. Strength-based views of PWD	Reflective observation that challenged earlier assumptions	Reduction of stereotyped beliefs through structured, supported contact
3. Empathy, patience and adaptive communication	Reflective observation of how support should be given	Perspective-taking encouraged by guided contact
4. Transferable HR competencies	Concrete experience of coordinating the community activity	Cooperation towards a common goal
5. Classroom knowledge and community practice	Abstract conceptualisation linking experience with HRM concepts	Institutional support from the university, student society and partner
6. Inclusive professional aspirations	Intentions that point towards, but do not yet evidence, active experimentation	Institutional framing of inclusion as part of HR responsibility

DISCUSSION

This study explored how a community-engaged job coach learning initiative shaped the professional learning of undergraduate HRM students. Addressing RQ1, students moved from viewing job coaching as task instruction or interview preparation to understanding it as continuous, individualised support that is gradually faded to promote independence. Addressing RQ2, students described a shift from deficit-based to strength-based views of PWD, and some began to locate barriers in organisational practices. Addressing RQ3, students connected the experience with HRM concepts, identified transferable competencies and expressed aspirations for inclusive HR practice.

Experiential Learning in HRM Education

The findings support the use of experiential learning in HRM education. Students first encountered job coaching and inclusive employment through practical exposure and community engagement, and the written reflection then gave them an opportunity to reconsider earlier assumptions and connect the experience with HRM concepts. This process reflects the concrete experience, reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation stages of Kolb's (1984) cycle. The study provides less direct evidence of active experimentation, the fourth stage. Although students expressed intentions to apply inclusive practices in their future careers, the study did not follow them into later activities or employment settings.

Contact, Empathy and Attitude Change

The reported movement from deficit-based assumptions to strength-based perspectives is consistent with evidence that structured contact can improve attitudes toward PWD (Beunza-García et al., 2025; Wozencroft et al., 2015). The institutional framing of the activity, supported by the university, the student society and a social enterprise partner, reflects the institutional support that Allport (1954) identified as a condition for positive contact. At the same time, Wüthrich et al. (2024) show that gains in explicit attitudes may not be matched by changes in implicit attitudes, which cautions against treating students' written accounts as evidence of deep or lasting attitude change. Similarly, the form of empathy students described, which emphasised asking before helping and adapting communication, aligns with accounts of empathy as perspective-taking (Bird & Viding, 2014) and as a workplace social competence (Goleman, 1998), rather than with sympathy or pity.

From Individual Deficit to Organisational Responsibility

One of the most significant findings was that students increasingly recognised that barriers to employment may arise not only from an individual's impairment but also from inaccessible recruitment practices, employer attitudes and insufficient workplace support. This is important for future HR practitioners, because decisions relating to job design, recruitment, selection, training and performance management can either reduce or reinforce these barriers. It is also consistent with the rights-based framing of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (Laws of Malaysia, 2008), which emphasises equal access to employment rather than individual deficit.

For recruitment and selection in particular, this shift has direct implications: job descriptions that focus on essential tasks, accessible application channels, selection methods that allow reasonable adjustments, and interviewers who assess capability rather than impairment. Students' references to job matching (P6) and to inaccessible recruitment processes (P11) suggest that the experience helped them see these as HR design choices rather than fixed features of the labour market.

These findings suggest that disability inclusion should not be treated as a stand-alone awareness topic within HR education. It can be integrated across recruitment and selection, training and development, diversity management, employee relations and organisational development. Community partnerships with social enterprises and disability-support organisations may provide a practical way for universities to expose students to these issues while contributing to local employment inclusion.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. The data represent students' self-reported perceptions shortly after the programme, and students may have provided socially desirable answers, particularly because the activity was connected to their academic programme. The study therefore does not establish that permanent attitude or behavioural change occurred. Rather, it shows that students perceived the experience as meaningful and described intentions to approach disability and employment inclusion differently.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the reflections of undergraduate HRM students following their participation in a community-engaged job coach learning initiative. The findings suggest that the experience helped students develop a broader understanding of job coaching, reconsider assumptions about the employment capabilities of PWD, strengthen

interpersonal and transferable HR skills, apply classroom concepts in practice and develop aspirations for more inclusive professional practice.

Theoretical Implications

The study extends the application of experiential learning and intergroup contact perspectives to HRM education in a Malaysian context. It shows how a relatively short, institutionally supported contact experience, followed by structured reflection, can prompt the first three stages of Kolb's cycle, and it highlights the need to design for the fourth stage, active experimentation, if learning is to translate into practice.

Practical Implications

For HRM education, the findings highlight the value of combining classroom instruction with structured community engagement and guided reflection. Guest lectures and disability-awareness sessions may provide useful knowledge, but deeper learning is more likely when students are given opportunities to observe, participate, reflect and connect their experiences with HR theories and practices. Universities may therefore consider developing longer-term partnerships with social enterprises, government agencies and disability organisations that provide students with supervised exposure to inclusive employment while helping community partners expand awareness of and support for PWD.

The study also highlights the need to position disability inclusion as a core HR responsibility. Within Recruitment and Selection courses, educators could use job coaching cases to teach job analysis, person–job matching and reasonable accommodation in selection. More broadly, future HR practitioners should be prepared to design accessible recruitment processes, identify appropriate workplace accommodations, communicate respectfully with employees and advise employers on inclusive people-management practices.

Limitations And Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small and drawn from a single undergraduate programme at one institution; the findings therefore reflect a specific educational and community context and should not be generalised to all HR students or universities. Second, the study relied on written self-reflections collected after the programme. Although these provide useful insight into students' perceptions, they do not independently confirm changes in attitudes, competencies or behaviour, and students may have presented more positive responses because the activity was associated with their academic programme. Third, the study did not include a comparison group, formal pre-programme data or long-term follow-up, so it is not possible to determine whether the reported developments were caused solely by the programme or whether they remained stable over time.

Future studies could use pre- and post-programme measures, interviews, focus groups and observations to provide a more detailed understanding of student learning, including measures of implicit as well as explicit attitudes. Researchers could also follow students during internships or after graduation to examine whether they apply disability-inclusive practices in recruitment, training and employee management. Including the perspectives of PWD, employers, job coaches and community partners would provide a more balanced assessment of the programme's value and impact.

Conflict Of Interest

The first author was involved in organising the programme, as acknowledged in the Methodology. The authors declare no financial or other conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The anonymised reflection data are not publicly available, to protect participant confidentiality, as consent was given for use in research and publication only. Anonymised excerpts may be made available by the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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