

Developing Social Entrepreneurship Skills for Special Needs Students to Improve Their Employability Through Sulam

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ABSTRACT

One of the key objectives of the SULAM project is to empower OKU through vocational training. The project focuses on equipping OKU individuals with practical skills that can help them gain employment and achieve financial independence. The OKUs are trained in various vocational tasks, such as packaging and assembly. The training is tailored to the individual capabilities of each OKU, ensuring that they receive the necessary support and guidance to succeed in the workplace. By offering specific training programs, the project aims to address the barriers that prevent OKU from entering the workforce. This includes training OKU in skills that are in demand in industries like manufacturing, packaging, and services. The project not only provides the technical skills required for employment but also emphasizes the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and discipline as well as the social entrepreneurship skills in project management, communication, and problem-solving, all while working towards the goal of empowering OKU individuals. By participating in this program, students gain hands-on experience in creating solutions for social challenges. They learn how to identify community needs, develop sustainable business models, and implement projects that have a positive social impact.

Keywords: Employability, entrepreneurship, people with disabilities, SULAM, vocational training.

INTRODUCTION

The Service-Learning Malaysia University for Society (SULAM) initiative is a program that integrates community service with academic learning, aiming to create meaningful social impact through the efforts of university students (Hanum et al. 2021). SULAM provides a platform where students can apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings while addressing the needs of local communities such as the special kids with disabilities (Abdullah et al. 2026). This program fosters critical skills such as leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, and empathy, which are crucial for their professional and personal development (Adam & Mohamed 2024).

The specific focus of this SULAM project was to assist *Orang Kurang Upaya* (OKU) or people with disabilities (Mohamad et al. 2024). Our goal was to engage with this community and support them in developing employability skills, enabling them to find sustainable employment opportunities (Bartram et al. 2019). The project aligns with the broader vision of social entrepreneurship, where business and community initiatives

intersect to create positive societal change (Žur et al. 2018).

The collaboration among Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), *Pusat Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti* (PPDK) Seri Utama and Program *Kerjaya* under *Pertubuhan Keselamatan Sosial* (PERKESO) aiming to understand the challenges faced by OKU in both daily life and employment. The visit to PPDK Seri Utama, provided the students with insights into how OKU are trained in skills that could lead to employment. PPDK works with various institutions to prepare OKU for the workforce, training them in areas such as packaging and even guiding them through basic life skills, such as using public transport.

Another visit was to Old Town White Coffee in Ayer Keroh, where the students observed OKU in a real work environment. This visit was especially valuable as it highlighted how businesses could integrate OKU into their operations with the help of a job coach. They observed how Aini, an OKU trainee, was adapting to the job of preparing food and drinks. The experience reinforced the idea that with the right support, OKU can excel in various tasks, contributing meaningfully to their workplaces.

The SULAM project focuses not only on the academic and personal growth of students but also on the broader goal of promoting social responsibility (Samsudin et al. 2024). In this case, the students aimed to foster inclusivity by advocating for the employment and empowerment of OKU. By working with these communities and collaborating with key organizations such as *Kerjaya* and *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* (JKM), they were able to understand the systemic challenges OKU faces in securing jobs and propose ways to address them.

Furthermore, the project allowed them to explore the potential of social entrepreneurship as a powerful tool for social change. Social entrepreneurs are individuals or organizations that develop innovative solutions to social problems (Lillo 2019). In this project, they applied the principles of social entrepreneurship to design solutions that could help OKU overcome barriers to employment. For instance, by partnering with local businesses like Old Town White Coffee, students helped create job opportunities that are inclusive of OKU's abilities. This was done with the support of job coaches, provided through collaborations with *Kerjaya*.

Through SULAM, students not only contribute to the community but also gain a deeper understanding of how real-world problems can be solved by applying theoretical knowledge from their academic courses (Ngah et al. 2023). This program bridges the gap between education and social impact by offering students a unique opportunity to engage in hands-on experiences that have a meaningful and lasting impact on both the community and them.

The SULAM project serves as a model of how universities, students, and communities can collaborate to address pressing social issues. By engaging with the OKU community, students learned about the importance of inclusivity, the challenges they face, and the role the community can play in helping them achieve financial independence through meaningful employment. This experience not only enhanced their academic understanding but also instilled a strong sense of social responsibility, preparing them to become future leaders who are committed to making positive changes in society (Yusof et al. 2014).

METHODOLOGY

This SULAM project was designed to assist and empower OKUs, specifically through training programs that aim to equip them with employability skills. The project involved two key locations: PPDK Seri Utama, and Old Town White Coffee, Ayer Keroh, both of which are instrumental in supporting the OKU community. Their mission is to train OKU to become independent and productive members of society through structured programs that focus on vocational skills.

During our visit to PPDK Seri Utama (Figure 1), students observed several key aspects of their operations training OKU for employment. The center offers different training modules tailored to the abilities of each OKU individual. For example, trainees are taught packaging skills, where they package various items, such as seeds (*biji sawi*, *biji cili*), at different levels of complexity. Each level corresponds to the trainee's ability, with more advanced tasks given as they progress. This practical training prepares OKU for real-world job tasks,

particularly in industries that require basic packaging and assembly work.

One of the most impactful moments was the speech by the supervisor, who emphasized the challenges faced by the OKU community. He mentioned that many OKU individuals are often overlooked by employers despite being capable of contributing to the workforce. He shared that his own child has a disability, and he provided insights into the growing population of OKU, particularly due to factors such as birth conditions, accidents, or illness. He highlighted the need for businesses and society to make special accommodation for OKU, working in collaboration with organizations like *Kerjaya* to create dedicated job opportunities for them.

One of the lead trainers at PPDK (Figure 2), explained the structure of the center's programs. She referred to the OKU individuals as "*pelatih*" (trainees) and described how the center collaborates with external institutions to train and support them. For example, she mentioned how some of the trainees are employed by Family Mart Batu Berendam, where they handle packaging tasks. These partnerships are essential in ensuring that OKU individuals transition from training to employment. He also noted that the center would begin accepting OKU trainees under the age of 12 starting in 2025, but for now, most participants are adults with various forms of disabilities, including autism and developmental delays.

In addition to vocational training, PPDK also focuses on improving the life skills of OKU individuals, including their ability to use public transport independently. The center organizes outings where OKU trainees learn to use public transportation such as the LRT, with plans to extend this training to air travel in the future. This aspect of the program is vital for improving their mobility and independence.

Through this visit, students gained a deeper understanding of the structured support system that exists for OKU, but students also recognized the challenges they face in finding meaningful employment (Figure 3). While the center provides excellent training, the opportunities for OKU to transition into the workforce remain limited, especially in areas beyond basic packaging tasks.

This set the stage for our second visit to Old Town White Coffee, where students explored how businesses could integrate OKU into their operations (Figure 4). The second visit was to Old Town White Coffee in Ayer Keroh, Melaka, where students observed firsthand how OKU individuals can be integrated into mainstream employment. This visit was critical in understanding how businesses can play a role in providing employment opportunities for people with disabilities, ensuring that they are supported with job coaching and adapted roles.

At Old Town White Coffee, an OKU trainee who was undergoing job training (Figure 5). The trainee was accompanied by a Job Coach, who was responsible for guiding her through the various tasks at the café. The job coach, provided by *Kerjaya*, plays a vital role in ensuring that OKU trainees can adapt to their work environment. The trainee was trained in the preparation of beverages and simple food tasks, such as making sandwiches. Over time, the job coach's support is reduced as the trainee becomes more independent. This system ensures that OKU individuals like Aini can gradually integrate into the workforce without being overwhelmed.

The trainee faced challenges in adapting to the fast-paced nature of the café. She struggled during her first week, particularly with the volume of tasks and the language barrier, as some of her coworkers were foreign workers. However, through perseverance and support from her job coach, she began to adjust to her responsibilities. This experience underscored the importance of patience, clear communication, and tailored training when working with OKU individuals.

She has an intellectual disability that affects her comprehension, meaning that she needs more time and repetition to master certain tasks. The café's management worked closely with her job coach to ensure that her tasks were within her capabilities and that she was not overwhelmed. This reflects how businesses can adapt roles to fit the strengths of OKU individuals, allowing them to contribute meaningfully without being put under excessive stress.

By providing structured training and job coaching, they create a supportive environment where OKU can thrive

(Momm & Konig 1989). The collaboration between businesses and organizations like *Kerjaya* ensures that OKU individuals are given the chance to develop their skills and eventually become independent workers.

The primary goal of the SULAM project is to foster social entrepreneurship while simultaneously addressing the needs of marginalized communities OKU. The program aims to empower these individuals by providing them with the skills and opportunities necessary to become independent, productive members of society. The objectives are structured to create a positive and sustainable impact on both the OKU community and the students involved in the project.

By offering specific training programs, the project aims to address the barriers that prevent OKU from entering the workforce. This includes training OKU in skills that are in demand in industries like manufacturing, packaging, and services (Fasching 2014). The project not only provides the technical skills required for employment but also emphasizes the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and discipline (Delsen 1989).

Ultimately, the objective is to prepare OKU for employment in sectors where they can contribute meaningfully, while also ensuring that they are given the support they need to succeed. This is particularly important in industries where OKUs face challenges such as high productivity expectations or complex tasks, and where tailored training programs can help them thrive.

The second objective is to create sustainable employment opportunities for OKU by fostering collaboration between training centers, businesses, and organizations such as *Kerjaya*. The program actively seeks to bridge the gap between the OKU community and potential employers by building strong partnerships that can lead to job placements.

For example, the visit to Old Town White Coffee in Ayer Keroh highlighted the effectiveness of such collaborations. By working with businesses willing to hire OKU, the project provides real-world opportunities for OKU to gain employment. In this case, the café employed an OKU trainee, Aini, who was supported by a job coach. The café worked with *Kerjaya* to ensure that Aini received the necessary support, and her tasks were adapted to match her capabilities.

Through these partnerships, the SULAM project aims to expand the number of businesses willing to provide job opportunities to OKU. The project's objective is to demonstrate to employers that with the right support systems, OKU individuals can become valuable employees. This collaboration also benefits businesses by promoting inclusivity and corporate social responsibility, while simultaneously contributing to the economic empowerment of OKU individuals.

Another important objective is to raise awareness of the challenges faced by OKU in securing employment. Many OKU individuals are fully capable of contributing to the workforce, yet they often face social stigma and misconceptions about their abilities (Magrin et al. 2019). Through the SULAM project, students aim to dispel these misconceptions by educating the public and employers about the strengths and capabilities of OKU workers.

The secondary objective of the SULAM project is to promote inclusivity and social responsibility in the community. Inclusivity in the workforce means ensuring that people with disabilities, like OKU, have access to the same employment opportunities as everyone else. The project aims to encourage businesses and society to recognize the value of OKU employees and to create workplaces where everyone, regardless of ability, can contribute.

The program emphasizes the idea that social entrepreneurship is not just about running a business; it's about creating positive social change. By engaging students in real-world social challenges, the SULAM project instills in them a sense of civic duty and social responsibility. Students learn that their academic knowledge can be applied to create solutions for real-world problems, such as helping OKU individuals find jobs and integrate into society.

This objective goes beyond just creating jobs for OKU, it aims to build a society that values diversity and inclusivity, where people with disabilities are seen as equal contributors to the workforce. The program encourages businesses to adopt inclusive practices, such as providing accessible work environments and offering specialized training for OKU workers.

The SULAM project also has the objective of developing the social entrepreneurship skills of students. By participating in this program, students gain hands-on experience in creating solutions for social challenges. They learn how to identify community needs, develop sustainable business models, and implement projects that have a positive social impact (Usman et al. 2022).

For instance, our group was tasked with collaborating with OKU individuals, observing their training, and proposing solutions for improving their employability. Students developed skills in project management, communication, and problem-solving, all while working towards the goal of empowering OKU individuals.

This experience allows students to understand the power of social entrepreneurship in creating meaningful change. The project's objective is to prepare students to become future leaders who are committed to using their entrepreneurial skills to solve social problems, making a lasting impact on their communities (Sen et al. 2006).

The evaluation of our project focuses on assessing the effectiveness of our communication materials, specifically the infographic and video, in achieving the objectives outlined in the SULAM project. The evaluation framework considers key engagement metrics, clarity of messaging, and overall impact in raising awareness about the PPDK initiative for the Orang Kurang Upaya (OKU) community.

To determine the effectiveness of the infographic in communicating key messages, students evaluate it based on content relevance and clarity, ensuring it effectively conveys the intended message about OKU empowerment, employability training, and social entrepreneurship. Additionally, visual appeal and readability will be assessed by analyzing design elements such as color contrast, font size, and imagery to ensure they are accessible and engaging to a diverse audience. Audience engagement will be measured by gathering feedback from program participants, including students, OKU community members, and stakeholders, regarding their understanding and perception of the infographic. Finally, distribution and reach will be considered by tracking the number of people exposed to the infographic through various platforms, including social media, printed materials, and physical distribution at program locations.

While the video serves as a key tool to raise awareness and advocate for inclusivity in employment opportunities for the OKU community. The evaluation will focus on message alignment to determine whether the content aligns with the project's goal of fostering social entrepreneurship and promoting employment for OKUs. Clarity and emotional impact will also be assessed to determine whether the storytelling approach effectively conveys the importance of the initiative and resonates with viewers. Engagement metrics, such as video views, watch time, likes, shares, and comments across different platforms, will be analyzed to gauge public interest and reach. Additionally, stakeholder feedback will be gathered through qualitative feedback sessions with PPDK representatives, employers, and OKU individuals to evaluate the effectiveness of the video in advocating for workplace inclusivity.

Beyond direct engagement with the materials, students assess the broader impact through awareness and perception assessment. This includes pre- and post-exposure surveys administered to participants before and after engaging with the infographic and video to measure changes in awareness and attitudes toward OKU employment. Stakeholder interviews with educators, community leaders, and business representatives will also be conducted to understand their perceptions of the materials and how they might influence policy or hiring practices.

Given the digital promotion aspect of our project, students utilize social media analytics to measure reach and impressions, which represent the total number of users who have seen the infographic or video. Engagement rate will be monitored to assess the level of interaction with our content, including likes, shares, and comments, to determine its effectiveness in generating interest. Additionally, hashtag performance will be analyzed to

monitor the impact of any campaign-specific hashtags and track discussions and the spread of information.

As the project aims to create a meaningful impact, feedback from key stakeholders including OKU individuals, PPDK representatives, and employers will be gathered to assess understanding and acceptance, specifically whether the materials have helped increase awareness and understanding of OKU employment challenges. Finally, the potential for further action will be considered by evaluating the likelihood of businesses and organizations taking steps to implement inclusive hiring practices based on the information provided.

By employing these evaluation methodologies, the infographic and video effectively contribute to the overarching goals of the SULAM project, particularly in advocating for OKU inclusivity in the workforce and promoting social entrepreneurship initiatives.



Figure 1. SULAM students visit PPDK Seri Utama



Figure 2. Briefing by staff of PPDK Seri Utama



Figure 3. Discussion with students' group



Figure 4. Visit to coffee shop



Figure 5. Guidance by coffee shop trainer and PPDK staff

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The SULAM program has proven to be a transformative initiative for the OKU community, effectively combining academic knowledge, social responsibility, and practical applications. By equipping OKUs with vocational skills and linking them to employment opportunities, the program has shown the potential for these individuals to thrive in supportive environments. The collaborative efforts of PPDK Seri Utama, Old Town White Coffee, and stakeholders such as JKM and *Kerjaya* have been pivotal in establishing a sustainable ecosystem for OKU empowerment.

The program delivered significant benefits to various stakeholders. For OKUs, trainees acquired valuable vocational skills, including packaging and food preparation, which boosted their employability and confidence. Success stories, such as Aini's progress at Old Town White Coffee, illustrated the ability of OKUs to overcome workplace challenges when provided with proper support. For employers and institutions, the program offered an opportunity to gain firsthand experience in working with OKUs, challenging existing stereotypes and deepening their understanding of workplace inclusivity. Institutions like JKM and *Kerjaya* played a vital role in bridging the gap between training and employment, further enhancing the program's effectiveness.

To build on its success, the SULAM program should consider expanding its reach and refining its offerings. Replicating the SULAM model in other regions and industries could extend its impact to a larger segment of the OKU community. Developing advanced training modules tailored to modern industries, such as technology and digital marketing, would further enhance the employability of OKUs. Advocacy for policy changes is another critical area, where government bodies could be encouraged to provide stronger incentives for businesses hiring OKUs and adopt inclusive policies that support OKUs in both education and employment sectors. To ensure long-term impact, the program could establish mentorship and alumni networks to provide ongoing support to OKUs after program completion. Additionally, collaboration with diverse industries to create customized roles that align with the strengths and preferences of OKUs would further solidify their integration into the workforce.

The SULAM program has laid a strong foundation for a more inclusive and equitable society, demonstrating that with the right resources and partnerships, OKUs can achieve remarkable milestones. By continuing to expand and refine its initiatives, the program holds immense potential to create lasting change, not only for individuals but for entire communities. The business model is shown in Figure 6. Table 1 shows the possible problems and solutions for the issues regarding the employability of the OKU.

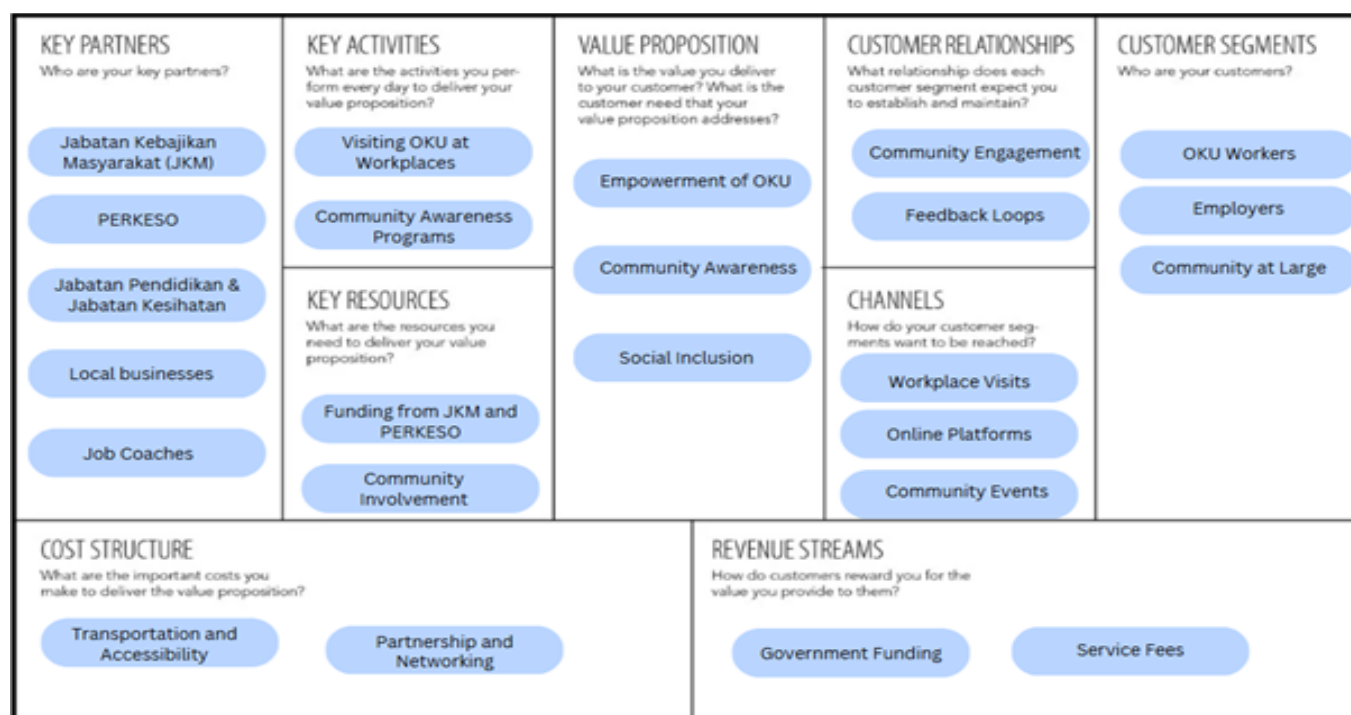


Figure 6. Business model canvas

CONCLUSION

Through participation in the SULAM project, the students gained a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship and its role in addressing social challenges. Students learned that social entrepreneurs create businesses with a dual focus on profit and positive social impact. For instance, during their visit to PPDK Seri Utama, they observed how the program was structured to provide OKUs with essential skills and training to support their employment. This firsthand experience illustrated how entrepreneurial efforts could improve the quality of life for OKU, particularly through initiatives like partnerships with organizations such as *Kerjaya* under PERKESO, which provide job placements for OKU individuals. Community engagement was another critical component of the SULAM program. By working closely with centers like PPDK Seri Utama, students saw how collaboration between the community, educational institutions, and businesses could create a robust support network that enhances opportunities for OKU. PPDK Seri Utama collaborates with external organizations, such as Family Mart, where OKU trainees are involved in packaging tasks. This experience demonstrated the importance of building partnerships to ensure sustainable support systems for marginalized communities. Additionally, students learned how the activities organized by PPDK help OKU gain independence by teaching them life skills, such as using public transport. Throughout the project, their communication skills were tested and refined. Engaging with OKU individuals, their trainers, and community leaders required active listening and the ability to convey ideas clearly. OKU faces numerous obstacles, including limited job opportunities and challenges in workplace adaptation. Students observed OKU trainee struggling to keep up with the fast-paced environment of Old Town White Coffee, prompting us to think critically about task suitability for OKU individuals. This situation underscored the need for training programs tailored to the specific needs of OKU, along with public awareness initiatives to advocate for businesses to create roles that align with the strengths of OKU workers. Finally, the success of the SULAM project heavily relied on leadership and teamwork. Students learned the importance of collaboration within their group and with external organizations such as *Kerjaya*, JKM, and local businesses.

Table 1. Problems and solutions

No	Problem	Proposed Solutions
1.	❖ Employer Reluctance to Hire OKUs ➤ Many employers remain hesitant to hire OKUs due to misconceptions about their capabilities and the additional support they may require.	❖ Employer Awareness Campaigns ➤ Conduct workshops and awareness sessions to educate employers about the benefits of hiring OKUs, including potential government incentives and the positive impact on workplace diversity.
2.	❖ Workplace Adaptation Challenges ➤ OKUs, like Aini at Old Town White Coffee, often faced difficulties adjusting to fast-paced environments and understanding complex instructions, especially when coworkers used unfamiliar dialects or languages.	❖ Extended Job Coaching Programs ➤ Increase the duration and intensity of job coaching, particularly for OKUs with intellectual or communication challenges, to ensure smoother workplace integration.
3.	❖ Limited Training Scope ➤ The program's focus was largely on packaging and basic food preparation tasks, which limited OKUs' exposure to other potential career paths.	❖ Diversified Training Modules ➤ Introduce additional training areas such as IT skills, graphic design, or customer service to broaden OKUs' career opportunities.
4.	❖ Inconsistent Support ➤ While job coaches played a vital role in supporting OKUs, there was a lack of long-term mentorship plans for transitioning OKUs into independent roles.	❖ Community and Institutional Partnerships ➤ Strengthen collaborations with schools, NGOs, and corporate entities to create a larger network of support and increase access to resources.
5.	❖ Financial and Resource Constraints ➤ Sustaining programs like these requires ongoing funding, which posed a challenge for PPDK Seri Utama and partnering institutions.	❖ Securing Funding and Sponsorship ➤ Seek funding from governmental and private sector partners to ensure the sustainability of vocational training programs.

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