

Exploring the Gerontological Skills Competencies of Social Workers through Vocational Education and Training in Caring for the Elderly

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ABSTRACT

The profession of gerontology social work in Malaysia is not well known and is usually assumed as volunteer work without any professional certification. This study explored the competency skills and social work impact in gerontology, among the graduates in enhancing their interest in caring for the elderly. This study explored the vocational training utilization through Gerontology Social Work courses at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). This study used a qualitative approach from 9 respondents who were selected through purposive sampling. The study was conducted at Rumah Ehsan Kuala Kubu Bahru, Selangor. Data were analysed in verbatim from the transcripts acquired via in-depth interviews with the respondents. The study found that Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) Level 3 apprentice in elderly care, felt that hands on learning in the actual setting while performing their industrial training were more meaningful and immersive compared to just learning the theories in the lecture room. Most of the respondents said their growing awareness and enthusiasm had now become the catalyst to defend the neglected senior citizens in the institutions. The three main values expressed by the respondents were patience, empathy and higher quality services should be inculcated in caring for the elderly. This study proposed better

marketing at higher learning institutions and collaboration with stakeholders to improve employment opportunities among gerontology social work graduates who have the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) Level 3 in elderly care.

Keywords: Competencies, elderly care, gerontology, graduates, social worker & vocational education and training

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INTRODUCTION

Gerontology social work refers to social workers who work with senior citizens. The main goal of gerontology social work is to maintain and improve the quality of life and well-being of senior citizens and caregivers (Milne et al., 2014). Social workers need to understand the physical and mental health problems faced by senior citizens in the economic, social and environmental context. Not only social workers work with the elderly, but they also need to work closely with the family members and the local community for better problem-solving. At present, there are 1.8 million senior citizens in Malaysia or 7% of the total population and is expected to increase to 3.4 million or 10% by the year 2020 and continue to rise to 5.1 million or 15% in 2035. The phenomenon of an increase in the aging population in Malaysia indicates that career in gerontology social work is critically needed to support and maintain the well-being of senior citizens (Holmes et al., 2013).

The rapid increase in aging population demography and changing nature of the family system have an impact on the urgent need for the workforce for short term and long term elderly care. According to Berkman et al. (2000) social work education training does not reflect the substantive contribution over the past 35 years by gerontological social work practitioners and researchers to the field of aging especially providing services to older persons, their family in the community, long term care and in the hospital setting.

The main reasons enduring the workforce in this field were: identify person job-fit interest to care work, enhanced professional images, salary structures, build pay grade, developed various certificate levels and creating healthy-wellbeing care work environment (Ju-Chun, 2019). Berkman et al. (2016) recommended that there was a crucial need for collaboration creative partnership between field practice and link with an academic social work program to develop innovative models of preceptorship, integration of classroom and field learning, and web-based learning to maintain service role in the new millennium.

Preparing students for gerontology social work is moving slowly despite the recent demographic changes experienced by senior citizens. According to Brody (1970), awareness of gerontology social work is still lacking. Also, there is a shortage of students studying gerontology and elderly care. There are several factors that cause this situation to occur, i.e. faculties offering gerontology courses are insufficient (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997), lack of interest in gerontology among students (Berenbaum, 2010; Kane, 1999; Mosher-Ashley & Pearl, 2000; Paton et al., 2001) and obstacles in the curriculum (Lubben et al., 1992). Additionally, social worker students are less keen to work with senior citizens compared to clients from other target groups. In practice, gerontology social work is in the fifth position compared to other practices such as mental health, child welfare, health, and family services (Scharlach et al., 2000).

In Malaysia, the division of social workers according to their expertise is yet to be created, especially those with specialized skills and expertise in gerontology. This suggests that Malaysian social workers' competency is not at par with their counterparts from abroad. According to Wynn (1995), social workers from abroad who are involved in geriatrics, still feel inadequate to serve the elderly. Even though they have wide knowledge of servicing senior citizens, they still face various obstacles and challenges.

Competence is the ability to apply one's skills and knowledge in new situations in the workplace. This concept includes the organization and job strategy, innovation in handling non-routine situations, the personal qualities that organizations require to deal with colleagues, managers and customers. Competence provides overview information on the individual's ability to take on any activity or participate in a group activity. The standards of competence will take into account the knowledge and skills, how well it is applied or used in the workplace. Competence is used as a principle of marking a boundary or benchmark where abilities and achievements can be evaluated (The Professional Standard Council of Australia, 2011). In this study, competence refers to the ability of social work students to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes in new situations whether during industrial training or employment. Social work graduates are expected to apply what they have learnt in lectures and fieldwork during the course of study, in their employment.

Social work profession is facing numerous challenges as the life expectancy of senior citizen increases at local and global levels. The demand for social workers in elderly care will continue to increase dramatically over the next decade as Malaysia will become an aging nation by 2035 (Wan Ibrahim, 2017). The drastic rise in aged population density should be tackled with increased efficiency among gerontology social workers to help elderly clients from various aspects of health, nutrition, psycho-social and others (Rosen et al., 2003; Scharlach et al., 2000). However, the demand for gerontology social workers is critical, as there is a lack of committed social workers attending to senior citizens in this country. Archbold et al. (1995) and Silver et al. (2004) found that most of the previous studies focused more on the knowledge, skills and duties of family members caring for their elders, and lacked research related to gerontology social work profession. Students' preparedness towards the gerontology social work profession is very slow and not given much exposure. There are several factors that cause this situation, such as inadequate faculties offering gerontology courses (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997), lack of student interest in gerontology (Berenbaum, 2010; Kane, 1999; Mosher-Ashley & Pearl, 2000; Paton et al., 2001) and barriers to the curriculum (Lubben et al., 1992). Additionally, social worker students are less keen to work with senior citizens compared to clients from other target groups. In practice, gerontology social work is in the

fifth position compared to other practices such as mental health, child welfare, health, and family services (Scharlach et al., 2000).

In Malaysia, there is not much research involving elderly care at institutions that offer the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) through Vocational Training and Technical Education. Most SKM studies focus on technical skills, engineering, hospitality, culinary and other skills (Glover & Bilginsoy, 2005) and less in the areas of community welfare such as early childhood care, disability studies or elderly care. According to Azmi (2013), Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) Level 3 holders can pursue university education to further enhance employment opportunities. The National Dual Training System (SLDN), initiated in 2005, is a special program designed for apprentices to undergo training at their workplace. As a result, this program has succeeded in increasing skilled manpower to meet the country's rapid development. The National University of Malaysia (UKM) a public university, is implementing the National Dual Training System (SLDN) program by joining effort with Department of Skills Development (Jabatan Pembangunan Kemahiran) and Department of Social Welfare (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat), for final year social work respondents to complete their industrial training at Rumah Ehsan (Alavi & Hazlan, 2018). With such a program, apprentices have the opportunity to experience and are trained in real work settings, providing social workers with a hands-on problem-solving skill, which is missing in theoretical

learning. Hence, to what extent gerontology social work students' awareness and the impact of gerontology social work courses can prepare students to meet the demands and requirements of professional elderly care.

Research Objective

The study aimed to explore incorporating vocational training in elderly care [Elderly Care Center Operations, National Dual Training Systems (NDTS)] with gerontology social work course at Faculty of Social Science and Humanities (FSSK), UKM. Also, the study examined the competence in gerontology skills to increase employment opportunities in elderly care in Malaysia.

METHODS

This study used an exploratory approach based on qualitative perspective. The survey data was collected from semi-structured interviews to seek how well UKM social workers were prepared in providing quality services to senior citizens in institutions. The study was conducted at Rumah Ehsan Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor. Respondents enrolled in elderly care program would learn 30% of the theoretical aspect at Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSK), UKM and another 70% gerontology social work practice would be carried out at Rumah Ehsan Kuala Kubu Bharu, Selangor.

Respondents who registered for the SLDN industry training program at UKM between the three years from 2016 to 2018, were 44 apprentices. This study was conducted in 2019 and involved UKM

apprentices from the second cohort of 2017 which comprised 14 respondents who completed the training. 5 respondents were not reachable or declined due to personal reasons but only 9 respondents agreed to participate in the study. The samples selected were UKM apprentices undergoing industrial training holding Malaysia Skills Certificate Level 3 (Senior Citizen Care Operation Institution). The inquiry was held using semi-structure interview questions. This semi-structure question was formed after researching and screening literature reviews. Respondents were also probed to answer in-depth interviews. Prior to the interview, the researcher solicited respondents' permission to record their conversation. Interviews were recorded using digital recorders.

Data were analysed using a thematic approach whereby themes, sub-themes were extracted from interpreted verbatim transcripts and presented in writing. This process involved coordinating information from personal transcripts obtained from interviews, field notes and other useful materials during the study. Data exploration was used to identify the units analysed by comparing the meaning, feeling and behavioural aspects while integrating the codes obtained for explicit conversion in open coding. Axial coding was made to classify the data obtained in specific categories. The codes obtained during the open coding process would be reviewed through observation and relationship among the codes. Next, the researcher would make selective coding that involved selecting the

core category in identifying the main themes with other themes and comparing coding schemes for improvement (Ezzy, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study involved 9 respondents of the Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (SKM) who enrolled in the second cohort of the year 2017. All the respondents were Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) respondents and had participated in the industrial training at Rumah Ehsan Kuala Kubu Baru, Selangor. Profile of nine female respondents age between 24 and 27 years old, showed that they came from different backgrounds. All the respondents participating in this study were Malay Muslims (Table 1).

Table 1
Profile of respondents

Respondent	Age	Sex	Zone
1	24	Female	Central
2	24	Female	East Coast
3	24	Female	Southern
4	24	Female	Southern
5	26	Female	Central
6	27	Female	East Coast
7	24	Female	East Coast
8	23	Female	Southern
9	26	Female	East Coast

The National Dual Training Scheme (SLDN) is a special program for respondents undergoing training in the workplace since 2005. As a result, this program has succeeded in meeting the increased demand for skilled manpower in line with the rapid development of the country. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) is one of the

public universities (UA) which provides SLDN programs in collaboration with the Department of Skills Development to prepare final year social work respondents undergo industrial training at Rumah Ehsan. Participation in such a program, allow respondents to get real experience and training, which is not attainable with learning theories only.

SKM stands for Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (Malaysian Skills Certificate), a certificate issued by the Department of Skills Development (JPK) under the Ministry of Human Resources (Department of Statistics 2017). Malaysian Skills Certification System (SKPM) looks into the policy, mechanism, standard and procedures involved in awarding Malaysian Skills Certificate / Malaysian Skills Diploma / Malaysian Skills Advanced Diploma. There are five levels of certification namely SKM level 1, SKM Level 2, SKM Level 3, DKM Level 4 and DLKM Level 5. SKM Level 3 covers the National Dual Training Scheme (SLDN) training method which involves two areas; comprising 70-80% industrial training in organisations and 20-30% learning theory and basic skills in classrooms. SKM is a qualification awarded to candidates who can prove their skills according to the fields and levels listed in the national skills standard.

Gerontology Social Workers Awareness of Vital Values

Just like other professional professions, values provide the direction, purpose and meaning for social workers in gerontology. Value is a form of determination that are

embedded in a person's belief system that directs their behaviour. The results of the study showed that respondents were aware of the key values that they should have. Seventy percent of respondents stated patience to be the key value while attending to senior citizens. Respondents should train themselves to refrain from tetchy behaviour or being emotional with the tantrum of elderly people. Patience is the key to success when dealing with senior citizens.

.. one has to have patience. We have to treat the elderly just like small children, the only difference is their behaviour is sometimes unpredictable. (Respondent 4).

.... main value they should have is patience...there's not much problem handling the elderly whom are known to us, however not easy in dealing with elderly who are not family members. (Respondent 5).

Another value that respondents need to have when caring for the elderly is empathy. Fifteen percent of respondents stated that as a gerontology social worker, they must have empathy. Empathy is an individual's ability to put themselves in others' shoes. When respondents of social gerontology are empathy towards senior citizens, helping them becomes easier as they are mindful of senior citizens' limitation and ability. Also, respondents should be tolerant of senior citizens.

...main value is empathy... we have to feel it happening to us, where we place ourselves in what the senior citizens go through. When we are able to feel their real situation, it will be easy for us to help them, easy to sympathise, and easy to get on with other tasks. (Respondent 2).

...the main value to have is empathy. We have to know the situation that the elderly are going through so that we don't pick out the wrong words or action. Most of the elderly have unstable emotion due to their past life (Respondent 8).

As prospective gerontology social workers, respondents need to uphold professional values while with senior citizens. A professional worker should be wise to distinguish between personal duties or official duties. In addition, professional workers should work in accordance with ethical codes set by the profession. Based on the interview, majority of the respondents stated that the main value gerontology social workers should have was professionalism. While 5 respondents considered patience, empathy and higher quality services as the main values for gerontology social workers.

.... main value is professionalism, where one should set a boundary between personal and profession.... though one may not be comfortable in the strong-smelling environment with the elders, we should look

at the situation professionally (Respondent 7).

.... main value to have is professionalism. While working at the institution we hear lots of stories on the elderly.... Future social workers should be tactful in such a situation and be ready to provide solutions. (Respondent 9).

In conclusion, as a professional helping profession, social workers should perform their duties based on ethical codes and set values. The Code of Ethics is merely a guide and reference for social workers to take action. If the code of ethics and values are not used in carrying out the helping profession, there bound to be problems that will affect the social worker and the elderly.

The Impact of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Gerontology Course

The finding shows that gerontology course taken by the nine respondents has a positive impact on them. Prior to taking the course, respondents did not have much exposure about senior citizens or on issues relating to the elderly, especially those living in care centers. With the presence of a gerontology course, they understood the needs of the elderly from a different perspective and felt the need to protect and stand up for their rights. As a result of this course, respondents have learnt noble values and are more loving and respectful to their parents. Meeting senior citizens in person, have made the

respondents sympathized with the issues they face in Malaysia. Often, respondents deal with issues from the oppressed target groups such as children, adolescents, disabled people and women. However, they are now aware of various issues related to senior citizens who need attention and action from all parties.

.... I was rather touched when given the opportunity to visit a nursing home and promise to be a dutiful child.... I've learnt new things on elderly from gerontology course.... (Respondent 1).

.... has made an impact on me, especially getting to know the changes senior citizens go through in life. Before this, I was surprised with my grandfather's strange behavior and often question.... After taking up the course, I understand as senior citizens age, their behavior and emotion change too.... (Respondent 8).

The findings in this research conform to Deissinger (1996), who stated that the “dual system” vocational training introduced in Germany for vocational training and workplace training allowed apprentices and workers expand their skills and experience while working.

...we were taught about senior citizens in theory, but theory only is not enough.... The practical

sessions made apprentices know more We follow the coach's instructions in dealing with senior citizens...on how to bathe them, to help when they choke on food, or to carry them when sick (Respondent 1).

Learning theory only is not enough to care for the elders. With practical, we'll have better knowledge and new experience. Theories are more academic, while practical is more to reality to know the ups and downs. Better understanding as a whole (Respondent 2).

The theories are applied while taking care of the elderly; such as changing diapers, preparing meals, feeding, and changing sheets (Respondent 5).

.... the theories learnt in classrooms are unfold before my eyes... For example, I could see elders who are suffering from mental illness such as Alzheimer and Dementia. What I learn in class is just about senior citizens' characters, not the care aspect (Respondent 7).

Theory application is very much dependent on the emotional state of the elderly, how we establish close rapport with them, helping them lead comfortable life through intervention, listening and

solving their problems with the administrator's help (Respondent 6).

Based on interviews with the respondents, learning theories in the classroom alone is not enough to handle the elderly, practical training is necessary to know the real situation in caring for the elderly. However, there are some challenges in adapting to real work, especially caring for those who are bedridden. In conclusion, respondents with gerontology knowledge, have better information on senior citizens. The classroom learning together with practical experience of working with senior citizens at care centers, add value and self-awareness to respondents towards providing senior-friendly services.

Applying Social Work Knowledge on Senior Citizens

Theories and skills acquired from gerontology course is an advantage to gerontology respondents. With the knowledge gained from gerontology courses, respondents have a better understanding and are able to apply it to senior citizens. The results showed that respondents have practiced what they learnt on senior citizens. To start with, the majority of respondents share related learning outcomes on senior citizens with their immediate family members. This is a positive start where respondents try to convey the knowledge they have learnt with others. Often, the knowledge shared with family members relates to a basic and simple task.

I will practice what has been taught, but with the basic and simple ones first...my grandma, a senior citizen, speaks less, so I taught myself to initiate a conversation with her. In gerontology class, we were taught that senior citizens need attention and appreciation. In my opinion, with frequent communication, I could help her overcome loneliness.... (Respondent 3).

...I feel I've learnt more on self-control after knowing about senior citizens' behavioral changes. I rarely raise my voice now. I try to improve myself little at a time so that grandma is not upset with me. Also, I'm more mindful of senior citizens' needs... (Respondent 2).

... providing suitable activities according to their age. I used to wonder why grandma refused to go out with us. After studying about senior citizens I now understand.... (Respondent 4).

.... I always share the simple ones such as good nutrition. I cautioned a senior citizen that eating too much junk food is not healthy, after finding out that he goes out often to buy junk food. I said he can eat them but not every day... (Respondent 9).

Although respondents were unable to practice the entire knowledge of gerontology in general, their contribution brought some comfort to senior citizens' wellbeing. Also, in learning senior citizens' behavioral changes, respondents have been more tolerant and accepting, and make efforts to improve their self-control too. All respondents were looking forward to participate in the workplace, as in such fieldwork, respondents would understand the scope of work better when attending to the elderly. In addition, the plan of sending students to countries or places that have attained the status of aged-nation will enhance them to learn about senior citizens' abroad.

The respondents' duty in handling senior citizens consists of several aspects, namely physical, emotional, and interpersonal tasks. Taking care of their emotional needs is a priority in ensuring senior citizens' well-being. Among the tasks carried out to boost their emotion is by storytelling, giving simple advice and encouragements. Sometimes respondents get advice from senior citizens who are worldly-wise. Senior citizens love it when respondents give attention to their stories. This finding conforms with the study conducted by Schumacher et al. (2000) which states that caregiving skills require integration with healthcare system such as monitoring skills. For example, nurses and social workers can work together in ensuring that caregivers have the skills needed to provide better care (Archbold et al., 1995; Scherbring, 2002; Silver et al., 2004).

CONCLUSION

The findings conclude that the key value in engaging a gerontology social worker is to educate and prepare them adequately with the interests, knowledge, skills in caring for senior citizens. Respondents should also have the right values and attitude while engaging them as a gerontology social worker. The three main values expressed by the respondents are patience, empathy, and professional. When these values are used in the helping profession, caring for the elderly becomes easy. In addition, the results indicate that the majority of students are not interested to work with senior citizens upon graduation. This is because they are not interested in a career with senior citizens. Also, they are not keen to face the challenges of handling senior citizens. There are several factors why students are not interested to work with senior citizens, among them are age gaps, environments and career-related myths and stereotypes with senior citizens.

Gerontology made an impact on social worker students as majority of respondents felt the need to improve their practical knowledge with various learning and teaching methods that would enhance their skills for future career development. The proceedings of both theoretical and practical courses in gerontology social work are still lacking in the Public Universities. Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that immersive learning experience could influence their readiness in the actual work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendation are:

- (i) The enrolment for Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) in elderly care should be extended to other public universities in Malaysia to produce more professionals in that area. Multi-agency collaboration should promote psycho-education on elderly care to reduce the sending of elderly to care centres through SKM (Elderly Care). This collaboration will further enhance the opportunities of education, training and employment in gerontology social work. The potential of gerontology social work profession can be extended to improve the well-being of senior citizens, families and communities.
- (ii) Universiti Awam (Public colleges and universities), DSD (Department of Skills Development), JKM (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia), Malaysian Association of Social Work (MASW) and NGOs need to collaborate in improving domestic and foreign job opportunities related to elderly care (such as care managers, case managers, care workers, and volunteers) through entrepreneurship training/development start-up programs, soft loans, post-graduation employment monitoring and exhibition centre

for TVET graduates in community care fields.

- (iii) The Government, in collaboration with various agencies, can introduce social entrepreneurship to graduates of Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) in elderly care to offer online or mobile home help services, like “Grab”, to provide best quality services for those with disabilities and senior citizens; allowing flexible working hours (gig economy), generate consistent income for youth, a job in place; job matching online, such as “urbanisation of care” care known as ‘Jaga Me’ in Singapore; urbansitter.com; Care.com and Care flex and so on.

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