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Opinion

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Empowering Second Chances: Vocational Education, Dignity and Social Inclusion for Youth in Correctional Settings

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Abstract

This opinion reflects my experience as a strategic partner supporting certification endorsement and quality alignment for second-chance vocational training for young people in a correctional setting in Malaysia. The training was delivered within the wider SCOPE agenda, which connects skills development with employment, income generation and social reintegration. I argue that vocational education should develop practical capability, respect dignity and connect certification with realistic opportunities beyond release. Immediate learning achievements matter, but lasting outcomes require continued support, employer acceptance and follow-up.

Keywords: Vocational education; Correctional youth; Dignity; Social inclusion; Reintegration

Introduction

This opinion grows out of my experience as a strategic partner supporting certification endorsement for second-chance vocational training in a correctional setting in Malaysia. The training formed part of Second Chances and Opportunities for People to Excel (SCOPE), an initiative of the Human Resource Development Corporation (HRD Corp), an agency under the Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia, developed in collaboration with the Malaysian Prison Department. SCOPE connects skills development with employment, income generation and reintegration, and explicitly recognises the role of employers and industry in opening opportunities. This wider context matters. A second chance is not created by training alone; it also depends on whether society, employers and communities are willing to open a pathway forward. I write from a practice perspective, not as a formal evaluation of rehabilitation. My view is that vocational education should combine practical learning, dignity and continuity of support, consistent with UNESCO's emphasis on access to education during imprisonment and beyond release.

Discussion

Learning that makes competence visible

The programme involved 25 young participants in Keningau, Sabah, who completed five days and 32 hours of integrated training in haircutting, hygiene and equipment handling, entrepreneurship and business planning, digital-marketing exposure, and psychosocial support. Learning included mannequin-based practice, close supervision, competency observation and participant reflection. All 25 participants achieved certification across five competency domains: haircutting, hygiene, equipment handling, communication and basic entrepreneurship.

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For me, the strength of this approach is that learning becomes visible. Participants are given opportunities to practise, make mistakes safely, receive feedback and demonstrate what they can do. A certificate should represent demonstrated capability rather than attendance alone. At the same time, certification is an immediate achievement; it should not be interpreted as evidence of employment or lasting reintegration.

Dignity as an educational principle

Participant reflections described greater self-confidence, a more positive personal identity and stronger motivation for life after release. These reflections should not be treated as proof of lasting psychological change, but they remind educators that recognition matters. Learners should be treated with dignity in how feedback is given, how mistakes are handled and how aspirations are heard. Certification can recognise capability without reducing a person to their correctional status. Respect should not be something learners have to earn through success.

Support beyond certification

The programme also provided a starter toolkit. This is useful, but tools alone cannot guarantee work. SCOPE itself recognises that reintegration requires more than training: its support includes employment-related assistance, upskilling and reskilling, lifelong-learning support, community and family well-being, and life coaching or psychological support. This is an important shift from a course-based mindset to a pathway-based mindset.

In the programme I supported, the partners had complementary roles: HRD Corp funded the initiative, Nuvis Sabah delivered the training, Sekolah Henry Gurney Keningau provided the participant setting, and the Institute of Business Excellence, Universiti Teknologi MARA, served as a strategic partner supporting certification endorsement and quality alignment. SCOPE also places responsibility beyond the training room by encouraging greater public and industry acceptance and opportunities for participants to earn an honest living. In my view, this is critical. Skills can prepare a person for work, but employers and communities help determine whether that opportunity becomes real.

Assessing meaningful outcomes

From my perspective as a strategic certification partner, the number of certificates should not be the final measure of success. Follow-up should ask whether participants use their skills, continue learning and access meaningful work or enterprise opportunities. For this programme, employment, enterprise, wellbeing and reoffending should therefore be treated as follow-up outcomes, not as results already established. This is consistent with SCOPE's broader focus on employability, income generation and reintegration

The educational purpose is consistent with Sustainable Development Goal target 4.4 on relevant technical and vocational skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, and with the wider goals of decent work and social inclusion. However, SDG alignment should not be confused with evidence of impact. Claims about lasting income, reintegration or reduced reoffending require longer-term follow-up and appropriate evaluation.

Conclusion

My experience supporting this training has strengthened my conviction that a second chance should mean more than a completed course. It should connect useful skills with dignity, employer acceptance, community support and a realistic next step. Certification marks achievement, but reintegration requires an ecosystem around that achievement. The responsibility is therefore shared: educators must build capability, institutions must safeguard quality, employers must create opportunity, and communities must be willing to accept people who are trying to rebuild their lives.

Author Disclosure

The author was involved through the Institute of Business Excellence, Universiti Teknologi MARA, as a strategic partner supporting certification endorsement and quality alignment. The author was not the programme manager or training implementer.