

**What Happens After Graduation: The Challenges Faced by Ex-offenders
and Support Required in Their Reintegration Post-graduation**

Singapore After-Care Association

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I ABSTRACT

While the benefits of correctional education have been widely researched on, there is a lack of understanding on the challenges and support needed by ex-offenders after graduation from higher education. Hence, this paper seeks to examine the challenges faced by ex-offenders nearing and upon graduation from a tertiary institution. The support needed to aid them in their reintegration after graduation will also be identified. In-depth interviews were conducted with students from the Education Support Programme run by SACA who have graduated from a tertiary institution between one to five years previously. The findings reveal that issues related to employment continue to be a significant challenge. They were also faced with setbacks in their further pursuit of higher education. Areas identified by respondents that could aid them after graduation include expansion in scope of program, job matching, networking and sharing, as well as the continued provision of emotional support. Based on the findings, this study could be used as a framework for change to the existing education programs targeted at ex-offenders.

II INTRODUCTION

Education is a gateway to opportunities, especially for individuals who have been involved with the criminal justice system. However, ex-offenders often encounter a variety of reasons such as lack of support and guidance, as well as financial constraints that hamper them from pursuing an education. In Singapore, the Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) runs the Education Support Programme (ESP) which allows ex-offenders an opportunity to further their education. Under the programme, the Lee Foundation Education Assistance Scheme (LFEAS) provides ex-offenders with sponsorship to reduce their financial burden whilst pursuing their course of choice.

As early as the 1880s, efforts were made to transform prisons into schools whereby correctional education would be used as an instrument for rehabilitation (McShane & Williams, 1996). Since then, more education programs have been introduced for the incarcerated, and have become a key rehabilitative tool in the criminal justice system across many countries. Literature has consistently found benefits of correctional education which included a reduction in recidivism rates (Chappell, 2004; Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). However, these studies had focused on how education programs during incarceration may help an ex-offender with their reintegration after release. While there are many correctional education programs around, the existence of post-incarceration education programs are scarce. Moreover, there is also a dearth of studies that focuses on ex-offenders who had completed their higher (tertiary) education through such programs.

Although the ESP in SACA serves as a reintegration tool, cases are closed after they graduate from their course of study and there is little follow-up with student-clients upon graduation. To truly aid them during their reintegration journey, there is a need to understand the challenges faced by ex-offenders who have completed their tertiary education post-incarceration. This would allow us to identify the type of support they require after graduation so that they are able to fully leverage on the education received to facilitate their reintegration.

More often than not, ex-offenders experience a range of challenges during their reintegration into the community. As suggested by Graffam and Shinkfield (2012), the conditions affecting their success may fall within three ecological domains, which are intrapersonal conditions (including physical and psychological health and substance use),

subsistence conditions (including finance, employment, and housing), and support conditions (including social support, support services, and criminal justice support) (p. 898). As the scope of study may become too wide, it may not be practical to address all conditions and factors mentioned. Instead, the paper will focus on the subsistence condition specifically employment and support conditions as they could be more relevant to the respondents in this study.

As an exploratory study, this paper aims to understand the challenges faced by ex-offenders who graduated from ESP. The timeframe commences from the period when they are nearing graduation and includes the time after graduation from a tertiary institution. In addition, the support needed to aid them in their reintegration process after graduation will be identified. Recommendations on changes to current education programs for ex-offenders in Singapore will also be made. In-depth interviews were conducted with the ESP graduates from tertiary institutions to identify their needs and challenges after graduation.

Literature review

Compared to the general population, people involved in the criminal justice system were shown to be significantly less educated, in terms of both formal educational qualification and educational performance (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009). This is also the case in Singapore where the majority of the inmates possess lower secondary level qualifications (Singapore Prison Service, 2017). Therefore, it is no wonder that literature in the correctional landscape has constantly emphasised the benefits of education for the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated. Not only does education bring about benefits to the ex-offenders, but to the society as well (Bruyns & Nieuwenhuizen, 2003). Some of the major benefits of education include increased employment, reduced recidivism, and improved quality of life (Brazzell et al., 2009).

Studies have also found education to affect self-esteem and self-efficacy positively (Pyror & Thompkins, 2013). It is believed that education increases pro-social attitudes and moral reasoning, improve self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as aid the development of a pro-social identity (Brazzell et al., 2009; Case & Fasenfest, 2004). As stated by Mohammed and Mohamed (2015), a formerly incarcerated person getting ready to return to the community would look within themselves to find a renewed sense of self and plan on staying away from criminal behaviour. It has been suggested that offenders who return to the

community without preparations or education could result in bitter individuals and increased recidivism (Mohammed & Mohamed, 2015).

Most literature has shown a positive relationship between correctional education and employment, thus implying that inmates with formal educational qualifications are more likely to find employment than those without any qualifications (Davis et al., 2013; Gaes, 2008; Stevens & Ward, 1997). The effect of education on employment is also important as employment plays a role in the reintegration process and reduce recidivism of ex-offenders (Brazzell et al., 2009; Case & Fassenfest , 2004; Chan & Boer, 2016; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011). Most criminological research has also found an inverse relationship between employment and crime, suggesting that ex-offenders who are employed will have a significantly lower risk of reoffending (Mallubhotla, 2013; Tripodi, Kim, & Bender, 2010).

Participation in basic correctional education can affect employment outcomes of inmates, either by development of skills which increases human capital, or through a signalling effect to potential employers that suggest they are more likely to be a better candidate than applicants without credentials (Tyler & Kling, 2007). The negative signalling effect of incarceration implies a situation whereby conviction and incarceration deliver a negative message to employers about the character and capability of an individual (Western, 2007), and it has been argued that the negative signalling effect can be reduced through formal educational achievement (Brazzell et al., 2009). However, the study by Tyler and Kling (2007) had found only weak evidence of signalling effect for basic correctional education, and this only applied to the inmates from a minority population. The authors also concluded that basic correctional education had no impact on recidivism (Tyler & Kling, 2007). The notion that basic education is insufficient for ex-offenders has also been mentioned by Spangenberg (2004), highlighting that increasingly the jobs available require some form of post-secondary education, and therefore it would be difficult to find employment without higher education.

Indeed, higher education has been identified as a factor to lower recidivism and higher social mobility, which may lead to increased earnings and stronger families (Halkovic et al., 2013). For example, studies have shown that the completion of post-secondary correctional education correlated with a reduction in recidivism rates (Chappell, 2004; James, 2015; Stevens & Ward, 1997), increased employment rates (Davis et al., 2013), and increased self-esteem (Case & Fassenfest, 2004; Pyror & Thompkins, 2013).

The literature discussed thus far focus on education programs provided during incarceration. Upon release, many ex-offenders may want to further their education but might not be financially capable to do so (Pyror & Thompkins, 2013). There may also be other barriers, other than financial capability, that are holding them back from furthering their education after release (Oliver, 2010). Studies have shown that ex-offenders who have completed a higher education program during or after incarceration have a higher probability of employment and desistance after release, in comparison to non-completers (Ford & Schroeder, 2011; Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson, 2012). Given the potential of education to positively affect an ex-offender's life, it seems worthy to let the newly released individuals have the chance to further their education in the community (Pyror & Thompkins, 2013).

Involvement in higher education after release takes place in an environment where social and academic support systems are available, and this experience could aid cognitive transformation in ways that are significant for desistance processes (Runell, 2017). In addition, being enrolled in a tertiary institution of learning may reduce the burden of incarceration as they benefit from having more opportunities to develop prosocial networks and to enter the workforce (Runell, 2017). By improving cognitive abilities and decision-making skills, higher education can help an ex-offender avoid criminal behaviour and be involved in positive behaviour (Brazzell et al., 2009).

While a number of correctional education programs are available for incarcerated persons, there are relatively fewer programs that provide aid for those who wish to further their education after release. One such program is the Post-Prison Education Program in Seattle, Washington, USA. The Post-Prison Education Program creates opportunities for the formerly incarcerated by providing them with resources ó scholarship, academic advising, career counselling, and mentoring ó to have access to higher education (Post-Prison Education Program, 2016). A preliminary evaluation of the program found that there is a significant difference in the one-year recidivism outcomes of any new offence between the clients and controls (applicants who were not admitted), but not for felony offences. However, due to the small sample size, results may not be conclusive (Lovell, 2009). Despite that, it appears promising that post-incarceration higher education plays a role in reducing recidivism rates.

However, before an individual could even appreciate the benefits brought about by completion of higher education, he would be faced with a set of challenges that may hinder

him from realising the value of education. As most studies have focused on the benefits of education for the formerly incarcerated, not many studies had been conducted to understand the challenges faced by individuals who had completed higher education post-incarceration, and the support that may be needed to help them reintegrate into society after they have graduated. Similarly, there is little, or close to no, locally published studies that look into the challenges and support needed by ex-offenders who have graduated from a tertiary institution. At the same time, we cannot deny that students from a prison school face a unique set of challenges after release. However, there might be differences in the type of challenges, and the emphasis placed on each challenge, between prison school students who were just released and ex-offenders who have completed their higher education post-release. Hence, through this paper, we aim to identify the challenges and support needed by the latter group in order to better help them realise the value of higher education and navigate their way back into the community.

III METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In an attempt to explore the experiences of ex-offenders who have graduated from tertiary institutions, this study used a qualitative approach to collect and analyse narratives from in-depth interviews. This methodology allowed for the exploration of meaning that individuals attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013). From the narratives, a detailed and more nuanced understanding of the respondents' perspectives on the events around them can be created.

Participants

Data was collected from ex-offenders who had graduated through the ESP in SACA. To be included in the study, respondents should have graduated from a tertiary institution, attaining either a diploma or degree. A list was created to include all potential respondents that met the criteria; they were then contacted by their respective caseworkers regarding participation in the study.

To be included in this exploratory study, respondents should have graduated at least one year prior to the collection of data. This would allow the researcher to identify their immediate concerns after graduation, and allow them sufficient time to search for and secure employment in order to share any difficulties faced during this search. To limit recollection bias, only respondents who had graduated up to three years previously were included in the initial list. However, due to the lack of potential respondents, the list was expanded to include respondents who had graduated up to five years prior to this study. Therefore, the final sample consists of 10 respondents who have graduated between one and five years previously; refer to Table 1 for demographic information.

Table 1

Demographic distribution of respondents

Respondent	Age	Race	Gender	Course of study	Year of graduation
R1	36	Indian	Male	Degree in Psychology and Human Resources	2012
R2	29	Chinese	Male	Degree in Chemical Engineering	2014
R3	38	Chinese	Male	Degree in Real Estate	2012
R4	29	Indian	Female	Diploma in Applied Drama and Psychology	2012
R5	34	Chinese	Male	Diploma in Business Practice & Human Resource	2016
R6	30	Malay	Male	Diploma in Electronics, Computer & Communications Engineering	2016
R7	49	Chinese	Male	Diploma in Industrial Engineering	2015
R8	37	Chinese	Male	Degree in Technology (Chemical Engineering)	2013
R9	42	Javanese	Male	Diploma in Power Engineering	2014
R10	25	Indian	Male	Diploma in Sports Coaching	2016

Ethical Considerations

Prior to all interview sessions, informed consent was obtained from the respondents. Content on the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was explained to the respondents before consent was given. The PIS includes permission to do an audio recording, a description of the research purpose, options to withdraw from the interview, and other safeguards to the respondents' confidentiality. A copy of PIS was also given to the respondents. Regarding confidentiality, only the researcher and respective caseworker know the identity of the respondents. All identifiable information was excluded from this report, with names being replaced with a code number. All interview recordings and transcripts were also stored securely on a computer with password protection.

Upon completing the interview, respondents received *FairPrice* vouchers as a token of appreciation.

Data Collection

Each respondent was interviewed in-person using a semi-structured interview guide. Please refer to Appendix A for the guide questions. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All respondents were invited to share their journey and experiences regarding the area of focus. Time was given to explore new themes that arose. Some probing skills were also used to draw out more information and to clarify responses. Interviews were conducted in private at SACA where possible, or at locations where respondents could feel at ease, which included cafes and a fast food restaurant.

The interviews were captured via tape-recorders to facilitate the eventual transcribing of data. Recorded information was solely used for the purpose of analysis contributing to the research and was not circulated.

Data Analysis

The data collected was examined through thematic analysis, which is a method commonly used in qualitative research (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Themes and sub-themes, which are patterns emerging across data sets, were identified to answer the research questions.

IV FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

A Challenges Nearing and Upon Graduation

The interview focused on the major challenges that the respondents faced six months leading to graduation and their experiences post-graduation. One major theme that was commonly mentioned centred around employment. Another was the challenges faced in pursuing higher education.

A.1 Employment

All respondents encountered challenges in employment when nearing graduation, as well as after graduation. Some of them continued to face difficulties even after they were employed. Two sub-themes were identified as part of their challenges regarding employment: (1) criminal record hinders employment and job advancement, and (2) course of study not preparing them sufficiently for the working world.

A.1.1 Criminal Record Hinders Employment

Eight respondents listed securing a job or career progression as one of their concerns nearing, and upon, graduation. For respondents who were studying full-time, they were planning to find full-time employment after graduation. Respondents working full-time while pursuing their studies (part-time) mentioned career progression as their top concern. These findings echo the research of tertiary students, in which ‘finding a job’ and ‘building a career’ were two of the top five concerns about life after graduation (Chan, Ho, Choy, & Quek, 2014). However, the respondents in this study face an added challenge compared to other tertiary students – having a criminal record hindered them in all stages of employment. During the job search process, respondents encountered a number of rejections, which were attributed to declaring that they had a criminal record. As one respondent stated:

I applied as a teacher straightaway after I graduate. I was rejected straightaway based on my record. Of course they won't tell you but you should know there's no other way...I tried applying for some training companies, but they didn't get back to me.

Another respondent who wanted to seek a full-time position at his place of internship also faced rejection due to his record:

I think the concern is also because of my background. My supervisor, the person in charge of mentoring me, wanted to offer me a full-time position in the company. Then I told him the truth about my background, and he told me it might have some impact and (he) will have to consult the higher management before offering me the position. After that, he said probably not...I was quite bothered by the fact that my background was one barrier to entering this position. It's unlikely to get any (positive) results if you have declared (your criminal record).

- R3 -

In addition, respondents who were working full-time while pursuing their studies also faced obstacles due to their criminal record when trying to look for better employment. Specifically, they were looking for positions that commensurate with their level of education or offering better pay. As one respondent shared:

...I thought after graduation my company could have offered me a better position. But then again, I think they are a bit sceptical about me, so I searched for other jobs...that point of time my pay was about \$2k, so I was asking about \$2.6-2.8k, they don't really offer me that kind of salary, then I got this job at another place...they offered me \$2.8k there.

- R9 -

However, not everyone was able to progress like R9 did. One respondent mentioned that he did not see any value in education at the point of the interview as no positive changes were seen at work after completing a diploma program:

I think it could be because that my diploma did not have a direct cause of what I achieved at work. If I am given an increment because of my diploma, I would know the advantage of completing this education. But for now, there is no positive effect for me after I completed my diploma...My education is not proportionate to what I've achieved (at work), so the value of education is not that high.

- R5 -

This is significant because the value of education will often only be realized when it results in employment opportunities (Pyror & Thompkins, 2013). Throughout the early stages of the interview, R5 also kept emphasizing his belief that having a criminal record was what prevented his career advancement when he was confident that he would have been promoted based on his performance alone. He shared his view of declaring his offending past on the interview form when he first applied for the position:

That was something I also had ever regretted informing my current employer about my offence, because I know that is the reason hindering my career advancements for this company...I am very sure that given my performance, if without that piece of (prison) release paper in my personal file, I would have already been promoted. But on the other side, if I didn't declare (my offending past), I would have made a false declaration in my interview forms... the moment this thing is (found) out, I would not only lose the promotion, I would also lose my job.

Despite facing difficulties during the job search due to their record, all respondents managed to secure employment within six months of graduation. However, a closer look at the responses reveals that the positions they eventually took up were not out of choice, but more out of practical necessity. One respondent put it this way:

Actually, I don't mind any position, as long I have a full-time job, anything that can pay me at least 2-3k.

- R6 -

(The job) wasn't what I want, but no choice...I was just trying whatever I could get at that time. After all, not all the openings will be there for us, so I just tried out the position, which is the least preferred choice.

- R3 -

Generally, respondents who were looking for full-time employment after graduation found their record to be a hindrance to the process. For others who wanted to build on their career, it was also not easy to get a higher paying position despite having obtained higher

academic qualifications. Even if they found a job, these positions were not what they wanted but still they took it up because jobs were hard to come by.

There is a possibility for the formerly incarcerated with a bachelor's degree to recidivate if education is unable to translate into employment (Pyror & Thompkins, 2013). Hence, having employment opportunities is of utmost importance to aid these graduates to reintegrate into society. However, having a criminal record is a barrier to employment that can result in stigma from prospective employers, giving rise to discrimination in hiring decisions of ex-offenders (Hurt, 2017). From the narratives, the respondents felt they were discriminated against at different stages of employment because of the stigma associated with having a criminal record.

However, the stigma can be real or perceived. For R1, even though he was not given a reason why his application was rejected, he perceived himself to be stigmatised and discriminated against, and attributed the rejection to his criminal record. Similarly, R5 had perceived stigma due to his past record as the reason for his lack of career advancement. For both respondents, they could have been rejected due to various reasons but perceived themselves to be discriminated against due to their criminal record. On the other hand, R3 was offered a full-time position by his company when they had no knowledge of his past record. Yet, the offer was retracted after he revealed he had a criminal record. Hence, he was discriminated primarily based on his record. Whether the stigma is actual or perceived, it should be highlighted that respondents in this study perceived it as a real challenge and were equally affected by the hiring choices of employers. Also, discrimination based on a criminal record is associated with higher psychological distress (Turney, Lee, & Comfort, 2013), which can affect the reintegration process. Once again, it should be emphasised that the perceived stigma and discrimination is a real problem and could affect the reintegration of these graduates. Thus, this issue should be addressed to aid them in their reintegration post-graduation.

From the responses, it is also important to note that many of the respondents looking for their first full-time position were more worried about finding a job rather than looking for suitable employment related to, or commensurate with, their level of education. Instead, they were willing to take up any opportunity that appeared. It should be noted that the level of remuneration also affects re-entry outcomes whereby individuals with higher salary are less likely to recidivate (Visher, Debus, & Yahner, 2008). Many would have assumed that

graduating from a tertiary institution would allow ex-offenders to have an advantage when looking for employment, in comparison to those with lower levels of education. It has also been suggested that formal educational achievement can help to reduce the negative signalling effect of incarceration (Brazzell et al., 2009). Yet, many of the respondents in this study are still dealing with the fundamental problem of just 'finding a job'. While these individuals may just be as equally capable and educated as an individual without a criminal record, negative signals of criminal conviction may be more notable, and thus, outweighs the positive signals of education (Tyler & Kling, 2007). Nevertheless, given the amount of time and effort they had put in to complete their tertiary education, they should be encouraged to start thinking about self-actualisation in order to realise their potential and find meaning in their work.

A.1.2 Course of Study Not Preparing Them Sufficiently for Work

Three respondents felt that their course did not fully prepare them for working life. While the focus of tertiary education is the acquisition of academic knowledge, it is also important to realise that it is necessary to provide ex-offender students with information and the soft-skills required to prepare them for the transition to the working world. Guidance on the basics of how to write a resume and present oneself during an interview are critical practical first-steps that need to be given attention. As one respondent shared:

Challenge would be the interview process. During the interview...you need to present yourself as someone who can take on the job.

- R8 -

Having held a diploma level position while studying, R8 wished to find a position that reflected his level of education. While the course may have prepared him for the knowledge needed for the job, it did not prepare him for how to present himself during an interview in order to secure the job.

When asked about whether the course prepared them for working life, two respondents replied:

Actually not really ...it's the set of skills not taught in school

- R9 -

I think the university prepare us for critical thinking, but in real life that's not the only thing that works. I think the soft skills are also very important, like people-to-people interaction, how to manage people, I think that's more important, which is not taught in school. I believe all we learn is theory...overall we still need...the soft skills

- R3 -

While it is essential to provide knowledge on the area of study, it is equally important to prepare these individuals for the skills required in different stages of employment to further aid them in their employment and reintegration journey.

A.2 Impediments in Continuing the Pursuit of Higher Education

Four respondents were eager to further pursue their education after graduation but had to delay or give up the idea due to various reasons. These respondents had graduated with a diploma and had plans to enrol in a degree program. However, only one had actually done so at the time of the interview. One respondent shared his reason for wanting to get a degree:

After I graduated (with a diploma), basically the course never led me to anywhere, because the engineering course is just a stepping stone for me to take the degree. It doesn't help me gain any advantage in my work...it just built up my portfolio to show that I have another certificate.

- R7 -

Another respondent shared a similar reason:

When you talk about Singapore, you will need the paper (qualifications), then with or without (work) experience, you can just go. For those people who have experience, then they have no education, they can't really go up that high.

- R6 -

For these respondents, they felt that pursuing a degree is essential for them to progress in their career. R6 had found a job that was related to his course of study and subsequently grew to like, he felt that having higher qualifications would enhance his prospects for career

progression. One respondent shared how higher education could have an impact on ex-offenders and the community:

I study degree and masters and I become successful, it has a ripple effect because the whole community will realise so many ex-offenders are holding a high qualification...it has an impact on the whole of Singapore of how they look at ex-offenders...it makes a big impact on how the world perceives Singapore

- R1 -

Therefore, the pursuit of higher education not only benefits ex-offenders in terms of career progression, the community might also become more accepting of them and in turn facilitate their reintegration. However, having to pay for a degree program may be too financially taxing. One respondent stated:

...if I want to do my degree without financial support, maybe this is something (like) mission impossible

- R7 -

Although the respondents mentioned the need for financial support, they were aware that they could apply to the ESP to pursue a higher level of education. For these respondents, it was not the lack of financial support per se, but other responsibilities which they had to prioritise that hindered them from furthering their studies. While it can be argued that anyone could face the same problems during their pursuit of higher education, we should be mindful that education acts as a tool for reintegration for the respondents in this study. In addition, they had set their mind on pursuing higher education because they recognised the value of education, which they had not realised before. As a respondent shared:

I still remember what my sister said. When I was younger, I questioned why she kept pursuing her studies, and how much she can earn with this kind of education. She told me that study is not about how much you earn, it is to build up your knowledge...at that time, even she explain I didn't understand, but today I understand...even when I come to work, I will try to upgrade myself,

because I understand that lifelong learning is important, so the learning journey never stops.

- R7 -

While they may not be pursuing their higher education at the moment, the respondents understood that lifelong learning is important. At this stage, it may also be necessary for these respondents to take a break in their pursuit of higher education after taking other relevant factors into consideration. Since they had to prioritize other responsibilities, it might be prudent for them to take some time for themselves to settle into their new roles. Forcing themselves to pursue higher education now might result in undue stress that could work against their reintegration.

B Support After Graduation

From the interviews, four common themes emerged as ways to further support them after graduation. It is necessary to clarify that what was mentioned by respondents in this section were not challenges faced by them, but what they wished could have been provided or done. In many instances, respondents had found these aspects to be helpful in their reintegration efforts while studying.

B.1 Expanding the Scope of Support for ESP

Six respondents wished they could have gotten more support for their education after graduation. Specifically, four respondents were interested in getting into a masters or PhD program. Two respondents shared:

I want to further (my studies and aim) for (a) PhD, but will need (financial) help.

- R1 -

Before starting off the business on my own, I was thinking of furthering studies to (attain a) masters. But after starting the business, I don't really have time to go for studies. Probably in future (when things are more settled), I will go for something related to my business.

- R3 -

Two respondents who were pursuing their second diploma also wished more financial support could be provided. One said:

When I finish my diploma, the (ESP) program won't support me to have a second diploma, this is something which I think is lacking...If there's a chance for those like myself, instead of giving the support on the degree, I hope that people who complete their diploma will be given a chance to support them to have a same level (of education), like the diploma program.

- R7 -

At the moment, financial support is only provided up to the degree level. It is also not available for those who wish to pursue a second diploma or degree. However, from the interviews, several respondents do not view having a degree as the end point and are eager to pursue higher qualifications. Intuitively, it may seem ideal and logical to continue financially supporting the respondents for post-graduate studies or attaining a second diploma since education has benefitted them thus far. However, many factors come into play when expanding the scope of support. As such, there may be a need to perform a cost-benefit analysis to find out whether further support is necessary and appropriate for future graduates. For example, future applicants would need to justify why they need a second diploma to provide a better evaluation on whether financial support should be granted. As for post-graduate studies, the cost is much higher than a diploma or degree program, which makes a cost benefit analysis even more important. Still, even when there are more benefits than costs, it may not be within an organisation's ability to support these graduates. If this is the case, other (external) avenues of support could be explored to ensure these graduates are able to continue to reap the benefits of further education.

B.2 Job Matching and Employability

Another commonly mentioned theme regards finding employment. Seven out of ten respondents suggested more help could be provided after graduation to assist them in their employment search. Two sub-themes can be identified on the type of help required: (1) job-market information, and (2) job matching.

B.2.1 Job-Market Information

Information on the type of industry they can enter, and the possible career path were among the things that respondents wanted to know more about. Two respondents also added:

...maybe what (is) to be expected from the corporate life

- R2 -

...information that would advance my job status, anything that helps me gain (a raise in) my income from now on...

- R7 -

In fact, many respondents were already looking for information on employment even before they enrolled in their course of study. When asked about the kind of information that was important to them when choosing their course, many reported looking at the job prospects. As suggested by a respondent:

...understand what does the market requires, what pool of talent is it requiring in the future, this will actually increase their chances of gaining employment after graduating...

- R5 -

With regards to skills, workshops on resume writing and interview skills were seen as useful by the respondents. As one respondent put it:

...(workshops by) professionals who know what they're looking for in a job candidate. Also, on how to attend to questions related to that (ex-offender) label.

- R2 -

As highlighted previously in this paper, many respondents in this study felt that their course of study did not prepare them sufficiently for employment. Often, such information and skills were not provided during their course of study. Therefore, the ESP can arrange for workshops conducted by professionals to increase the employability of future graduates thus aiding them in their reintegration.

B.2.2 Job Matching

From the interviews, the respondents have also suggested for help to be provided in matching them to a job after graduation. Although they understood how the program may be restricted in its resources to match graduates to a suitable or the õrightö job, they felt any help in this matter would be useful. However, it should be noted that respondents defined the õrightö job differently. According to one respondent, the õrightö job means:

a job that suits them

- R6 -

Another respondent provided a slightly different view. He shared:

...job matching is never about interest I think. It is more on expectations for both parties, the job seeker's expectations of their employer, at the same time, the employer's expectations of the job seeker, there must be a balance.

- R5 -

He continued as to how organisations such as SACA could help:

There are two parts. First, the graduates must lower their expectations. Second, the employer must be open enough to accept them for who they are...(the expectations between employers and job seekers) should at least be near, and this will be where SACA come in to be the mediator.

- R5 -

Currently, job matching services for ex-offenders are provided by an agency and the respondents who highlighted this matter were indeed aware of the availability of such services. However, limitations on job matching should be highlighted. Although there are companies that are willing to hire ex-offenders, choices are especially limited for those who have completed tertiary education. The majority of positions available require only secondary school qualifications. In this case, perhaps it is the expectations or the limited job choices that led these respondents to find jobs through other avenues. Regardless of what is defined as the õrightö job, it may be useful to inform students of the availability of such services, manage their expectations regarding available opportunities, and initiate a link-up to such matching

services at an appropriate time nearing graduation. Since there are limitations on the support that could be provided in terms of job matching, relevant agencies could, instead, focus on how to increase the employability of students even before they graduate.

As mentioned earlier, hindrances in employment was a major challenge for most of the respondents in this study. Based on their experiences, more could be done to help them during the job search process. By increasing their employability, it might also increase the possibility that they will be able to find a job of their choice. Providing such help may aid in their reintegration process so they would not rush into accepting just any job that comes along which might increase the likelihood of job-hopping. While there are mixed findings on the effect of employment on desistance, we cannot deny the possibility that being in stable employment could help to sustain desistance (Paternoster, Bachman, Bushway, Kerrison, & O'Connell, 2015). According to Laub and Sampson (as cited in Kazemian & Maruna, 2009), stable jobs reduce reoffending by reducing criminal opportunities and developing a sense of identity and meaning to one's life. Hence, rather than being concerned solely with ex-offender employment rates, we should start shifting our focus to whether those who have successfully completed higher education are engaged in jobs which they find meaning in.

B.3 Social Networking and Sharing

The idea of forming an alumni made up of graduate student-clients of the ESP was also raised by five respondents. The formation of an alumni serves two main purposes. Firstly, it allows those who have graduated to get together voluntarily and network. The respondents mentioned that such events would allow those who went through the same experience to gather, extend their network of prosocial contacts, and exchange knowledge with their fellow graduates. For example, one respondent shared how such networking could help in their job search process:

After graduation, it's mainly about networking, and sharing of information with fellow graduates. So if there is any job opening, we can inform those who are still unemployed to ask them to join the interview...it actually eliminates the process of being shortlisted for the interview, so a referral would be much more useful. I think it also eliminates the barrier of going through the paperwork, submitting your information, and then get(ting) rejected from that.

Secondly, they highlighted the therapeutic value of giving back by sharing valuable experiences with existing and future students. Some respondents highlighted the benefits of such sharing sessions for current students:

...should be bringing back the alumni for the current students. They need to be motivated...

- R1 -

I think sharing of the university life from (the perspective of being an) ex-convict, so at least they (future students) are more prepared before they even start. Because when we are entering university, we face different difficulties...these are very different from what we encountered in prison. These are some of the things where a sharing session would be useful to prepare them for what is going to happen next...

- R3 -

One respondent also suggested the idea of support groups:

...people might speak more freely in these kind of events...(in formal settings) it might be hard to get feedback that might be helpful, whereas this support group might be a channel that they can get it...graduates might be able to advise them, or graduates might be able to hear some feedbacks that existing students does not want to tell their caseworker

- R5 -

Sometimes, existing students may be uncomfortable sharing their feedback on the program with their caseworkers. Hence, during these networking sessions, it may be an opportunity for them to open up and give honest feedback on the program. As such, the alumni can act as a bridge between staff and existing students. At the same time, staff would get to know what the existing students think of the program. This requires the caseworkers to work closely with members in the alumni so as to better understand the needs of the students.

B.4 Emotional Support

Many of the respondents had developed a positive relationship with their caseworkers during their period of study. Thus they mentioned that it would be good to continue receiving some form of emotional support from their caseworkers after graduation, though, they added, that this was not critical as they would also have other people to turn to at that point. The respondents shared:

Over the program...we still interact with our caseworker, so over time I still want to keep in touch, pretty much now it is like a friendship to me.

- R3 -

I think no matter how people out there will reject you, there is always this group of people or person [caseworker] who will support you to get whatever you need to help you through to your goals...

- R6 -

These respondents agreed that sometimes just getting a call to check on how they are progressing in life is sufficient. One respondent shared:

It's good to meet up with someone who listens, like a caseworker...Just someone who can listen. Sometimes the answer is within ourselves, we just need someone to ask the questions.

- R1 -

Another respondent (R3) also shared that the most appropriate duration for the formal relationship with their caseworker to continue would be for a short period after graduation. During this period, the purpose of meeting up with the caseworker would be to inform them of the options they have. However, while he felt that caseworkers may be the first person he turned to when he first started studying, he would mostly seek advice from his friends after graduation. Nonetheless, having a listening ear or some form of emotional support may be helpful right after graduation as they experience the transition into the next phase of life. Since most have a good relationship with their caseworker and felt that they have helped them in their reintegration, it may also be good to explore whether the helping relationship should be extended for a short period after graduation especially for those who believe they would benefit from it.

V DISCUSSION

In this study, a number of themes emerged pertaining to the challenges faced by the respondents nearing, and after graduation. They also shared the kinds of support that would help them in their reintegration after graduation.

One major challenge faced by nearly all of the respondents after graduation was with regards to employment. While some of them had difficulties securing a full-time job, for others it was hard to progress in their career. Despite having higher qualifications, many of them agreed that having a criminal record was a hindrance across the various stages of employment. Whether the discrimination they faced is real or perceived, we cannot discount the impact it can have on them, and how it might affect their reintegration efforts. In addition, many respondents often took up a position they were not interested in or that was unrelated to their course of study. Some of them took up a position simply because they needed a job. Given that these graduates have put in considerable time and effort to secure tertiary qualifications, not to mention the resources dedicated to their endeavours, perhaps more could and should be done to help them at least secure employment that is commensurate with their qualifications, and ideally be something that they find meaning being involved in.

Another sub-theme under employment was that their course of study did not prepare them fully for working life. While their courses provided the academic knowledge needed for work, it did not equip them with the soft skills required to function and excel at the workplace. The impediments in the respondents pursuit of higher education was yet another theme that was evident. Even when aware of the availability of financial assistance, the existence of conflicting priorities meant that several respondents had to put the idea of furthering their studies on hold. This enforced break in the continued pursuit of higher education need not necessarily be a negative development as it could also provide them with an opportunity to take stock of their lives and give them an opportunity to recharge before embarking on the next stage of their reintegration.

Four themes emerged for the types of support which respondents wished could be provided after graduation. Expansion in the scope of support for higher education was raised by respondents who were interested to pursue graduate studies or a second diploma. However, many factors come into play and should be considered when expanding the scope of support. Therefore, a cost-benefit analysis should be performed to determine the appropriateness of

further support for future graduates. In addition, more help on employment was also requested in terms of providing information and skills to increase employability, and job matching services upon graduation. Given the limitations that could be provided in job matching, relevant agencies should explore how to increase the employability of future graduates. Increasing the employability of graduates might allow them to find a job of their choice, and which they find meaning in. The idea of forming an alumni for networking and sharing was also mooted. Such groups would allow graduates to extend their prosocial networks and exchange knowledge, as well as share their valuable experiences with existing and future students. Finally, respondents wished to continue receiving some form of emotional support from their caseworkers after graduation. Having developed a positive relationship with their caseworker, it may be useful to consider extending the duration of support after graduation as graduates transit into the next phase of life.

Recommendations

Building on the themes identified by the researcher and the suggestions put forward by the respondents as part of this study, four recommendations can be made to enhance the ESP and possibly other existing education programs targeted at ex-offenders.

Firstly, more employment information and services can be provided for those in ESP. There are two aspects to the provision of such services. First, information on employment can be provided upstream. As mentioned, one of the factors that most respondents paid attention to when choosing their course of study was job prospects. This implies the importance they place on employability upon graduation. Many respondents in this study also shared that they were not able to gain employment within certain industries due to their criminal record. This suggests that prospective students sometimes lack the required information to make informed choices when selecting a course of study. For future intakes, students should be advised on the job prospects of their course of interest and be prepared for the realities and challenges they may face during their search and subsequent employment. The second aspect to consider is that the majority of the respondents did indicate that they had already decided on which course to pursue upon release while studying at the Prison School. As the ESP has seen the vast majority of its student clients originate from the prison school, it is worthwhile exploring the possibility of reaching out to student inmates at the institution to provide the information required so as to enable those interested to further their studies make more informed choices on the appropriate courses to consider enrolling in upon release.

The other aspect to consider regarding employment is the establishment of specialised career counselling services. As one respondent pointed out, it is important to understand the skills required as well as the specific market conditions for them to increase their employability upon graduation. Although general career counselling is currently being provided in the ESP to guide prospective students unsure about their choice of courses and career prospects, more specialised services may be required to discover the strengths and interests of these students. In addition, it may be beyond a caseworker's ability to be updated on the skills and demands of an ever changing job market as the realities can indeed transform by quite some measure in three to four years meaning what held true at the start of a student's education may be quite different by the time he or she graduates. Job coaches could thus potentially play an important role in enhancing the effectiveness of the ESP and other similar initiatives. In addition, such specialists might be able to provide graduates with better job matching services that commensurate with their level of education.

Secondly, alumni for past graduates can be formed for people with similar experiences to gather and extend their network. Education has been effective as a tool for reintegration for respondents in this study. Not only has education increased their confidence and self-esteem, it has also helped them in the desistance process. Education has also allowed them to think about their future and what they want to achieve in life. As R3 stated:

(Through education), you are exposed to a lot more different things, like you get to think over a lot of things. You will have time to think about the future and what you want to do in life. So if we want to change, I believe we can.

In addition, existence of positive social networks was one of the factors that played a role in the respondents' desistance process. Through these networking sessions, graduates may also get to expand their positive social networks. In a way, such groups and gatherings could also be a positive social support whereby they are surrounded by individuals of positive influence thus sustaining desistance. Having been through a similar experience, they may be able to understand each other's difficulties better and provide empathetic support. This platform would also allow them the opportunity to have someone to turn to if they need advice. On some occasions, members of the alumni can also be invited for sharing sessions to existing and potential students. Through these sessions, they can share the difficulties faced while studying and how they overcame them so as to prepare current students for future difficulties they may face. Existing students can also be invited to gatherings with alumni in an informal

setting where they may be more willing to share their concerns which may not have been raised to their caseworkers. Some respondents also felt that catching up with their caseworkers was a form of support that could be provided. Hence, through such gatherings, it is also an opportunity for graduates to update their caseworkers on how they are progressing in life thus enhancing accountability which enhances desistance.

Thirdly, the issue on perceived stigma and discrimination can and should be addressed by caseworkers while students are still enrolled in the program. Even if the stigma and discrimination is more perceived than actual, it has posed a real challenge to the respondents causing them distress and frustration. To address this, caseworkers can explore ways for them to overcome these challenges and work through their emotional needs. This incidentally further reinforces the need for the current program to be extended beyond graduation. In cases where the graduates perceive that they were being discriminated against during the employment process as a result of their criminal record, they would have someone to speak to and seek advice from which is actually usually the case for other ex-offender clients on aftercare programmes. It is also important for future studies to look at employers' perspectives to give a fuller picture on their hiring decisions with regards to ex-offenders and to explore their concerns. Employers can also be advised on how they can make fairer employment decisions that do not discriminate potential employees based on their backgrounds.

The notion of the alumni originates from the perceived benefits of a support group made up of likeminded individuals or those sharing a common path. Yet another manifestation of this is the concept of religious support groups. Religion has been found to be a powerful motivation of change for offenders, whereby the effects often extend beyond release to help individuals stay on the right path. Religion and spirituality has also played a huge role in the desistance process for some of the respondents in this study, as R1 put it:

Faith and bible has been a big help. It was my compass, gave me direction, teach me how to love my enemies, forgive people. Eventually, my value systems start to change. That has played a big role in my behaviour and character

Given the role of religion in the desistance process, a religious support group is an opportunity for existing and future students whose faith plays a pivotal role in their rehabilitation to leverage on this to further their reintegration. Secular organisations such as

SACA could look out for suitable faith-based organisations to refer interested student-clients to so as to tap on this resource.

Lastly, the scope of support for higher education could be expanded. A number of respondents in this study have indicated their interest in pursuing further studies, while a few respondents were also pursuing a second diploma on their own (as they were ineligible for further financial assistance from ESP). Perhaps some form of help could be provided to reduce the burden of those who do end up furthering their studies. Even though tertiary education has been beneficial as a tool for reintegration, there may be a need to perform a cost-benefit analysis to find out whether graduate studies provides sufficient additional re-integrative benefits to be a viable course of action.

Limitations

Firstly, the sample consists of those who had graduated for differing lengths of time. Some respondents had graduated one year prior to this study, while for some it was five years hence. For respondents who had graduated earlier, it could have led to recollection bias when they were asked to recall the challenges they faced and type of support needed immediately after graduation. As reintegration is an ongoing process, we cannot ignore the fact that respondents who had graduated for a longer period would be able to provide more insight into their reintegration journey upon graduation.

Secondly, the present study only interviewed those who had graduated from SACA's ESP, thus the findings cannot be generalised to other similar education programmes. The type of courses being funded by the program is academic in nature. By interviewing this group of respondents only, we were not able to discern the challenges and support needed by those who graduated from vocational courses. It has been pointed out that vocational training produces technical and marketable skills which might allow beneficiaries to overcome employment barriers more easily (Mohammed & Mohamed, 2015). In that sense, the concerns upon graduation may differ amongst the different groups. Therefore, it is important for future studies to include graduates from vocational training to find out whether their concerns and needs differ from those of academic courses.

VI CONCLUSION

The ESP provides ex-offenders in Singapore with opportunities to further their studies after release. The present study aims to understand the challenges faced by graduates from a tertiary institution nearing and upon graduation, and the support needed so as to help them realise the benefits and value of higher education. The findings suggest that having a criminal record hindered them in all stages of employment and many perceived themselves to be stigmatised and discriminated against based on their past. Having specialised career counselling may help overcome the challenges and provide them with better job matching services that reflect their level of education.

In terms of support, we see that more could be done to aid them in their reintegration after graduation. While it may seem logical to expand the support of the current program, it is necessary to perform a cost-benefit analysis to find out whether further support is required. Furthermore, it is unknown whether further education provides added benefit in sustaining the desistance process and continues to act as a tool for reintegration. Also, forming an alumni or support group creates an opportunity and environment to form positive social networks that can help them sustain the desistance process.

While it is not reported, it is evident from the interviews that higher education improves the self-esteem and confidence of the respondents. However, for them to fully benefit from and appreciate the value of higher education, the current program could look into extending the duration of the program so as to help them overcome the challenges and provide adequate support after graduation. The findings from this study could serve as a framework on possible changes to existing education programs for ex-offenders in Singapore to further aid them in their reintegration.

VII REFERENCES

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VIII APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

1. What were your major concerns during the last six months prior to graduation?
2. What were your challenges faced after graduation?
3. How have you stopped from reoffending since graduation?
4. What changes, in terms of sense of self, have you experienced since graduation?
5. What additional support do you think should be provided that can help you with your reintegration process after graduation?
6. What are the changes that should be made to the program?