

A Study on Career Development Perceptions-, Employment Anxiety, and Support Needs of Master's Students in Special Education

—A Case Study of the Cooperative Programme between Nanjing Normal University of Special Education and Quest International University Perak, Malaysia

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The development of special education worldwide has driven the growth of high-level professional training, and international joint education programmes have provided new pathways for cultivating special education professionals with cross-cultural perspectives. The Master's programme in Special Education jointly offered by Nanjing Normal University of Special Education and Quest International University Perak, Malaysia, brings together a diverse cohort of students from various countries and backgrounds—including those with prior special education education, as well as professionals from rehabilitation and related fields seeking further advanced studies.

In the context of educational internationalisation and evolving industry needs, this group faces dual adaptation challenges: how to align cross-cultural learning experiences with local employment requirements, and how to translate advanced academic qualifications into professional competitiveness. During their studies, some students express uncertainties regarding degree recognition across regions, career pathways, regional industry differences, and professional development trajectories. Additionally, as students in an internationally joint programme, there is a need for clearer information about programme structure, curriculum content, and the connection between learning outcomes and professional growth. These concerns relate not only to individual engagement and career planning but also reflect areas for improvement in terms of information transparency, academic guidance, and career support-

within the programme itself. This study focuses on this specific cohort to systematically understand their backgrounds, programme perceptions, learning experiences, career aspirations, concerns, and support needs. The findings will inform improvements to the programme and serve as an objective reference for prospective students and stakeholders.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the career development perceptions and employment concerns of current students in the programme through a questionnaire survey. Specific objectives include:

1. To profile the student cohort, including undergraduate backgrounds, prior experiences, and motivations for enrolment;
2. To assess students' understanding of programme structure, including duration, location-arrangements, curriculum design, and delivery modes;
3. To examine students' perceived learning outcomes, expected competency development, and their perceptions of the relevance of their studies to future careers;
4. To identify career preferences, employment confidence levels, and key areas of concern;
5. To explore the primary sources of anxiety and anticipated challenges in professional practice;
6. To identify gaps in knowledge, skills, practical experience, and information resources, as well as the types of support students need most;
7. To propose evidence-based recommendations for enhancing programme delivery and career-guidance services, and to compile objective reference information for prospective students, peer-learners, and those considering international study in this field.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance: This study focuses on a distinctive group—master's students in special education within an international joint education context. It complements existing literature by providing empirical data on programme perceptions, learning experiences, and career psychology among this population. It also explores how factors such as programme design, curriculum delivery, and cross-border qualification recognition influence learning outcomes and employment confidence, offering additional insights into talent-development in internationalised professional education settings. The study further contributes to understanding the professional adaptation of students transitioning from related fields such as rehabilitation into special education. As a small-scale exploratory investigation, findings are primarily relevant to this specific programme and cohort, and serve as a reference for similar studies rather than a basis for broad generalisation.

Practical Significance: For current students, this research can assist them in reflecting on their learning journey, identifying areas for development, and reducing uncertainty caused by limited information. For programme administrators, the findings provide feedback on curriculum-delivery, information clarity, and support services, enabling continuous improvement. For prospective students and external stakeholders, the study presents a realistic picture of the programme experience from the student perspective, aiding informed decision-making. It also offers insights for students in related fields and those considering cross-border education-pathways, while identifying gaps between educational provision and industry needs to better-align training with professional requirements.

1.4 Definition of Key Terms

- **Joint Programme Students:** Master's students enrolled in the collaborative programme between Nanjing Normal University of Special Education and Quest International University-Perak, Malaysia
- **Programme Structure Awareness:** Students' understanding of the programme's duration, location arrangements, curriculum framework, and delivery modes
- **Perceived Learning Outcomes:** Students' self-assessed knowledge acquisition and competency-development through coursework
- **Employment Anxiety:** Concerns, uncertainties, and lack of confidence regarding future career-prospects
- **Career Development Perception:** Individuals' understanding of their professional strengths, career positioning, industry outlook, and development pathways
- **Support Needs:** Resources and guidance students identify as necessary to support their learning and career preparation

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on currently enrolled students in the specific joint programme, with a relatively small sample size. As a descriptive exploratory study, no causal relationships are inferred. Data are based on self-reported perceptions rather than objective measures; programme details such as curriculum and duration are subject to official confirmation from both institutions. Findings reflect the context of this programme and should be applied cautiously to other settings or regions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Development of Special Education in China and Malaysia

Development in China

The development of formal special education in China has evolved over more than a century. Early special education institutions were established by foreign missionaries from the late 19th century onward. After 1949, public special education schools were gradually established though provision remained limited in scope. From the 1980s onwards, special education became formally integrated into national educational planning. State Council guidelines issued in 1989 outlined a national development framework, followed by legislative foundations including the Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities (1990) and the Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities (1994). The expansion of inclusive education through the 'learning in regular classrooms' initiative gained momentum in the 2000s, with the revised Regulations in 2017 further emphasising inclusive principles. By 2025, over 60 universities offer undergraduate programmes in special education, nearly 30 institutions provide master's-level provision, and doctoral programmes have expanded, creating a multi-level training system. However, regional disparities persist, with greater concentration of provision in eastern regions. While graduate numbers have grown, shortages remain in early intervention, inclusive education support, and rural services 方俊明 (2019); 王雁, 李欢 (2021).

Development in Malaysia

In Malaysia, formal special education began with the enactment of the Education of Blind and Deaf Persons Ordinance in 1951, though early services were largely delivered by religious and voluntary organisations. The publication of the Report of the National Committee on Special Education Services in 1979 marked the formal integration of special education within the national education system. The Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education Policy launched in 2004 further expanded inclusive provision in mainstream schools. Malaysian public universities including Universiti Malaya and Universiti Sains Malaysia have progressively introduced undergraduate and postgraduate courses in special education, though capacity remains limited compared with demand, particularly at advanced levels Yasin & Tahar (2019); Ministry of Education Malaysia (1979). Rather than characterising one system as 'more advanced' than the other, it is more accurate to note that the two countries have followed different historical trajectories and are at different stages of development in terms of institutional infrastructure, policy frameworks, and professional training capacity. International joint programmes provide a structured platform for mutual learning and cooperation between systems.

2.2 International Joint Education and Career Development

International joint education offers valuable cross-cultural learning opportunities but also presents challenges including differing academic structures, qualification recognition issues, geographic transitions, and varying professional standards. Clear communication of programme requirements and learning outcomes enhances student engagement and satisfaction. Research indicates that graduate employment concerns commonly relate to the alignment between educational attainment and labour market outcomes, clarity of career pathways, availability of professional opportunities, and competitive pressures. For special education graduates, additional challenges include variable public understanding of the profession, salary levels, emotional demands of the work, and differing qualification requirements across jurisdictions 咎飞 (2020); 王美芳, 曹漱芹 (2022). Students in international programmes face further dimensions: uncertainty regarding qualification portability across countries, differing professional standards, limited local employment information, and cultural adaptation costs. Existing literature has focused primarily on programme quality and curriculum design, with limited research specifically addressing how students perceive their learning experience, apply their qualifications across contexts, and navigate career planning in cross-border programmes 张蓉 (2023).

2.3 Research Gap and Purpose of the Study

There is a scarcity of research focusing specifically on master's students in international-joint special education programmes. Limited studies have examined how students understand programme requirements, how they connect their learning to professional competencies, and what support they need most throughout their studies. This small-scale study aims to address these gaps by documenting the student perspective, identifying areas for programme enhancement, and providing an authentic reference point for prospective students and similar programmes.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a questionnaire-based survey design. Data collection covers six main areas: participant background and undergraduate education history; awareness and understanding of-

programme structure and delivery; perceived learning outcomes and competency development; career aspirations and employment confidence; principal concerns and challenges; and suggestions for programme improvement. Findings are analysed in relation to broader industry-conditions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the student experience.

3.2 Participants

Participants are current master's students enrolled in the joint special education programme, totalling approximately 10–20 individuals. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. The diverse composition of the cohort across nationalities, academic backgrounds, and professional-experience provides a representative cross-section of the programme population.

3.3 Instrumentation

Data are collected using a self-administered questionnaire titled Survey on Career Development-Perceptions, Employment Anxiety, and Support Needs among Master's Students in Special-Education. Programme details referenced in the survey reflect general perceptions only;-official information should be sought from the respective university authorities. The complete-questionnaire is provided in the Appendix.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data are analysed using descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages,-and central tendency measures. Comparisons are made where appropriate across participant-subgroups. Qualitative responses are analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring-themes. All data remain confidential and aggregated reporting ensures individual anonymity.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality-. Participants may withdraw at any time without consequence. No personal identifiers are-collected. Responses are reported in aggregate form only. Official programme information-should be obtained directly from university communications; findings represent student-perspectives and do not constitute institutional policy or commitment.

Appendix: Questionnaire

Survey on Career Development Perceptions- , Employment Anxiety, and Support Needs- among Master's Students in Special Education

—Joint Programme between Nanjing Normal University of Special Education and Quest-
International University Perak, Malaysia

Dear Participant,

This anonymous questionnaire forms part of a graduate research study. It aims to understand students' backgrounds, programme experiences, learning outcomes, career plans, and areas of concern. All responses remain **completely anonymous and confidential** and will be reported only in aggregate form. Information regarding programme structure and curriculum included in this survey reflects student perceptions; official details are available from the university.- The survey will take approximately 10–12 minutes to complete. Thank you for your honest participation!

Part 1: Background Information

1. Gender:

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say

2. Age Group:

☐ 25 and under ☐ 26–30 ☐ 31–40 ☐ 41 and above

3. Nationality / Country of Residence:

4. Undergraduate Major:

- ☐ Special Education
- ☐ Rehabilitation Therapy / Allied Health Sciences
- ☐ Early Childhood Education / General Education
- ☐ Psychology / Social Sciences
- ☐ Other: _____

5. Prior Work Experience:

- ☐ Special Education related: _____ years
- ☐ Rehabilitation / Health related: _____ years
- ☐ Other professional experience: _____ years
- ☐ No full-time work experience

6. Current Employment Status:

- ☐ Studying while employed ☐ Full-time student ☐ Seeking employment ☐ Other: _____
-

Part 2: Understanding the Programme

7. Are you aware of the programme duration?

- ☐ Yes, it is _____ years
- ☐ I have some idea but not certain
- ☐ I am not sure
- ☐ Additional notes: _____

8. Are you aware of the study location arrangements?

- ☐ Yes, the arrangement is: _____
- ☐ Partially aware: _____
- ☐ Not sure

☐ Suggestions: _____

9. How familiar are you with the curriculum structure?

- ☐ I have a clear understanding of the courses
- ☐ I know the general outline but not full details
- ☐ I am still learning about the programme
- ☐ I would appreciate a clear curriculum overview being provided

10. Which courses have you taken or are currently taking? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Advanced Theories and Policies in Special Education
- ☐ Psychological Development and Assessment of Children with Special Needs
- ☐ Curriculum and Instruction in Special Education (including Inclusive Education)
- ☐ Rehabilitation Theory and Practice
- ☐ Research Methods and Academic Writing
- ☐ Educational Statistics and Data Analysis
- ☐ Special Education Administration and Home-School Collaboration
- ☐ Individualised Education Planning and Practice
- ☐ Other: _____

11. Are you aware of course duration and delivery modes?

- ☐ Yes — approximately _____ weeks per course; delivery mode: _____
 - ☐ Generally aware; varies by course
 - ☐ Not sure; clearer information would be helpful
 - ☐ Preferred pace / format: _____
-

Part 3: Learning Outcomes and Competency-Development

12. In what areas have you gained or expect to gain improvement? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Systematic knowledge of special education theories and frameworks
- ☐ Understanding of international approaches and comparative practices
- ☐ Practical skills in assessment, curriculum planning, and intervention
- ☐ Research competencies including data collection and analysis
- ☐ Cross-cultural communication and international professional understanding
- ☐ Broader awareness of emerging trends in the field
- ☐ Still in the process of learning and adaptation
- ☐ Other: _____

13. How relevant do you find the coursework to your future career?

- ☐ Highly relevant — directly applicable
- ☐ Generally relevant but requires practical adaptation
- ☐ More theoretical — would benefit from more practical examples
- ☐ Uncertain about direct application
- ☐ Suggestions: _____

14. What areas do you feel you most need to develop further? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Practical classroom or rehabilitation experience and case studies
- ☐ Local policies, professional standards, and qualification requirements
- ☐ Professional practice skills in cross-cultural contexts
- ☐ Career planning and job search preparation
- ☐ Industry information and internship opportunities
- ☐ Academic writing and publication skills

- ☐ Understanding career pathways across different countries
 - ☐ Not sure yet
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

Part 4: Career Planning and Employment Directions

15. Preferred career fields after graduation: (Select up to 3, ranked in order of priority)

1st Choice: _____ 2nd Choice: _____ 3rd Choice: _____

- ☐ Special Education School Teacher
- ☐ Inclusive Education Support in Mainstream Schools
- ☐ Rehabilitation Professional
- ☐ Early Intervention Specialist
- ☐ Programme Management in Education or NGOs
- ☐ Government or Public Sector Roles
- ☐ Teaching or Research in Higher Education
- ☐ Pursue Doctoral Studies
- ☐ Not yet decided — exploring options during the programme
- ☐ Other: _____

16. Preferred work location: (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Return to home country
- ☐ Remain in Malaysia / Southeast Asia region
- ☐ Explore opportunities internationally
- ☐ Depending on opportunities available
- ☐ Other: _____

17. Top three priorities when choosing employment: (Rank 1–3)

① _____ ② _____ ③ _____

- ☐ Salary and benefits
 - ☐ Job security
 - ☐ Professional relevance
 - ☐ Career development opportunities
 - ☐ Work environment and culture
 - ☐ Professional satisfaction and social value
 - ☐ Work-life balance
 - ☐ Public recognition and respect
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

Part 5: Employment Concerns and Anxiety

18. Confidence in securing suitable employment:

- ☐ Very confident
- ☐ Somewhat confident
- ☐ Neutral / Uncertain
- ☐ Somewhat concerned
- ☐ Very concerned / Anxious

19. What are your main concerns? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Degree recognition and acceptance in different job markets
- ☐ Qualification differences and certification requirements across countries
- ☐ Availability of positions and industry demand

- ☐ Salary expectations versus reality
- ☐ Competition and experience requirements
- ☐ Career transition from rehabilitation or other backgrounds
- ☐ Limited access to job vacancy information
- ☐ Unclear career progression pathways
- ☐ Alignment between programme content and job requirements
- ☐ No major concerns at present
- ☐ Other: _____

20. What challenges do you anticipate in professional practice? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Translating theory into daily practice
- ☐ Adapting to different professional cultures and standards
- ☐ Communication and collaboration with families, schools, and agencies
- ☐ Work-related stress and emotional demands
- ☐ Limited opportunities for advancement or further training
- ☐ Policy changes and systemic uncertainty
- ☐ Building professional experience from entry-level positions
- ☐ No specific concerns at this stage
- ☐ Other: _____

21. What contributes most to these concerns? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Limited understanding of actual job requirements and industry conditions
- ☐ Lack of direct professional experience and industry exposure
- ☐ Uncertainty regarding qualification recognition across borders
- ☐ Anecdotal information about employment challenges
- ☐ Personal confidence and clarity about future pathways

☐ Limited information sharing between programme and industry

☐ Other: _____

Part 6: Programme Experience, Support Needs, and-Reference Value

22. What have been your most valuable experiences so far? (Select all that apply):

☐ Enhanced knowledge and understanding of the field

☐ Broadened international perspectives

☐ Improved research skills and critical thinking

☐ Built professional networks with peers from various countries

☐ Strengthened professional identity and confidence

☐ Greater clarity about personal career directions

☐ Improved cross-cultural understanding and communication

☐ Still adapting and learning

☐ Other: _____

23. What support would help you succeed in the programme and beyond? (Select all that-apply):

☐ Clear programme handbook, course outlines, and assessment criteria

☐ Industry insights, career pathways, and labour market information

☐ Internship placements and industry mentor connections

☐ Guidance on qualification recognition and certification processes

☐ CV preparation, interview skills, and career counselling

☐ Alumni sharing and graduate career stories

- ☐ Practitioner seminars and real-world case examples
- ☐ Regular feedback channels for continuous programme improvement
- ☐ Other suggestions: _____

24. Who do you think would benefit from findings like this? (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Future students in this programme
- ☐ Prospective applicants considering this programme
- ☐ Students in similar programmes elsewhere
- ☐ Anyone considering international postgraduate education
- ☐ Educators and programme administrators
- ☐ Other stakeholders in the field
- ☐ Other: _____

25. One message for someone considering applying to this programme:

☒ **Thank you for your participation!**

References

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Note on citations in research proposal/design:

In the **initial research proposal/design stage**, references are included within the literature-review section and where specific claims are made — this demonstrates the academic-grounding of your study and shows reviewers you have engaged with relevant scholarship. **Not every sentence needs a citation**, but factual claims, historical data, existing research-findings, and comparative statements should be supported appropriately. This version follows-academic conventions: claims are evidence-based, comparisons are descriptive rather than-value-judgemental, and references appear in the standard academic format. 😊