

Young Persons with Disabilities in TVET - Focus Group Discussions Findings Report

10th March 2021



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Executive Summary

Skills for Youth Employment in the Caribbean (SkYE) is a four-year Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme. The programme aims to provide better training opportunities and access to employment for young people. It is also committed to facilitate PWDs inclusion in TVET and enhance their opportunities for significant employment. Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) held in December 2020, the programme sought to have an open conversation with PWDs to better understand the challenges they face in accessing relevant training programmes and subsequently finding gainful employment. The findings from the focus groups are expected to support further stakeholder discussions and better inform SkYE's future support for PWDs across the four beneficiary islands.

Each island invited young men and women between the ages of 15-30 years, living with disabilities to join the focus group discussions.

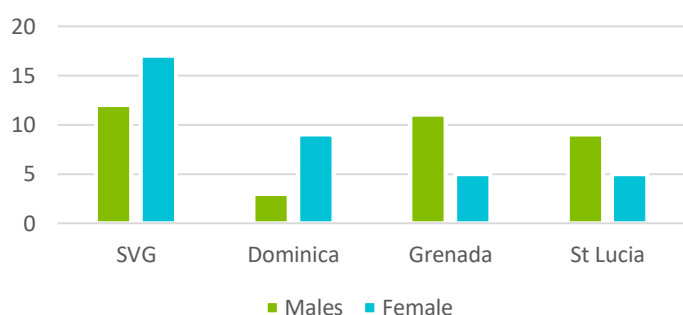


Figure 1: Distribution of Male and Female participants across all four islands in the FGDs

The key finding from the FGDs revealed three broad categories of barriers faced by PWDs in accessing training and gainful employment. These are the following:

Attitudinal	Environmental	Institutional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are negative assumptions about PWDs abilities • There is a lack of awareness of how to effectively engage with PWDs • Often PWDs face discrimination and stigma • There is often a lack of emotional support at home and pastoral care in training centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PWDs are often unable to navigate their way around training institutions or places of work • There is often a lack of suitable transportation for PWDs • Training and work environments are often not adapted to facilitate clear communication and access to information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PWDs needs are often not considered in the development of education and employment policies • Existing policies and laws that accommodate for inclusion are often ignored leading to further exclusion or discrimination of PWDs

Figure 2: Barriers faced by PWDs in accessing training and employment

The SkYE programme can play a key role in advocating for the removal of the barriers faced by PWDs. By engaging with the programme's key stakeholders through awareness raising and behavioural change activities, SkYE can support the promotion of inclusion of PWDs in society.

1 Introduction

Skills for Youth Employment in the Caribbean (SKYE) is a four-year Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme. Its purpose is to develop a better skilled, more productive and inclusive workforce in the four Eastern Caribbean islands of Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The programme is seeking to provide better training opportunities and access to employment for approximately 6,000 young people, with at least 10 percent being young people with disabilities (PWDs). The programme aims to do this by improving their employability in sectors where there is evident demand for skilled workers. These include established sectors such as hospitality and construction, as well as emerging labour markets. It is therefore anticipated that this will ultimately promote greater youth employment, increased productivity, and more inclusiveness in the labour market through better training and employment access for disadvantaged youth and PWDs.

SKYE is committed to working with young PWDs to facilitate their inclusion in TVET and enhance their opportunities for significant employment. Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) the programme sought to have an open conversation with PWDs to better understand the challenges they face in accessing relevant training programmes and subsequently finding gainful employment. The findings from the focus groups are expected to support further stakeholder discussions and better inform SKYE's future support for PWDs across the four beneficiary islands. This report will highlight the shared experience of those with a disability and those who care for and work with PWDs.

2 Approach

The focus group discussions were aimed at better understanding the barriers that constrain PWDs' ability to access skills training and employment. The SKYE Country Coordinators in each of the four islands were responsible for mobilising and hosting of the FGDs. Between December 7-17, 2020, a minimum of two focus group discussions were held across all four islands and in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a third focus group took place for parents, care givers and tutors.

SKYE solicited the support and assistance of the National Associations for Persons with Disabilities and any other relevant agency on their respective islands. These agencies assisted with the identification and the recruitment of potential participants for the FGDs.

Each island invited between eight and twelve young men and women between the ages of 15-30 years, living with disabilities to join the focus group discussions.

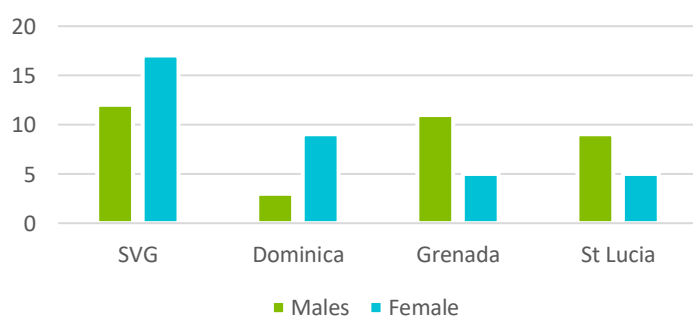


Figure 3: Distribution of Male and Female participants across all four islands in the FGDs

Across the four islands there was representation of physical, cognitive, speech, and hearing disabilities. The educational backgrounds of the participants varied widely, from those who started but never completed primary or secondary education and others who completed secondary school and those who went right through to obtaining a university degree.

The groups were divided by gender. This was to allow for better communication during the discussions and to determine whether gender plays a role in their respective experiences with accessing training and employment. Each session lasted between one and a half and two hours, and was moderated by a facilitator, with assistance from the SKYE Country Coordinator. A rapporteur and an interpreter of sign language were also present during the discussions. Participation at the FGDs was voluntary and confidential. The discussions were recorded with the permission of the participants.

Participants were invited to give their personal experiences with participating in skills training, registering for training, their educational journey and their experience trying to get a job. Some of PWDs attending the focus group discussions are registered trainees with the SKYE training programmes, whilst others just wanted the opportunity to speak to their reality and the many challenges and obstacles that exist in their lives.

Questions were developed by SKYE to guide the discussions. However, it was apparent that the questions had been modified during the course of the FGDs, therefore influencing the line of discussion on each island. Each participant was given an opportunity to answer the questions posed by the facilitator or the moderator. Their responses generated discussion and questions which further enhanced the conversation and provided real life examples of the participants' experiences.

Box 1 : Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What do you know about skills training?
2. What problems did you encounter in registering for training?
3. Tell us about your educational journey.
4. What do you know about NVQs?
5. Where are you interested in working?
6. How difficult is it to get a job or register for training?
7. Is there anything else you think we should hear from you?

3 Key Findings

An analysis of the FGDs held in the four islands revealed a number of similar barriers affecting the access of young PWDs to mainstream skills training and gainful employment to become more productive and independent people. These barriers can be further broken down into three broad categories: attitudinal, environmental and institutional.

3.1 Attitudinal Barriers

The general consensus from the four island discussions around attitudinal barriers, is the assumption that PWDs are incapable of actively and effectively participating in training or in the workplace. These attitudes hinder PWDs access to training and employment. Participants reported that the perception that PWDs are not independent or require additional support leads to them being overlooked or passed over because of their disabilities despite their eagerness to be engaged.

Box 2: Male Participant, Dominica

“I just know that it has been a bit of a challenge in trying to seek employment. For instance, in terms of training, depending on where it is it would be a bit of a challenge to get – they may see it as a challenge to train a blind employee as opposed to training a fully abled employee.”

The participants indicated that there is a lack of awareness by teachers, students, employers and the general public on how to engage effectively with people living with a disability. Teachers were often unable to relate to PWDs and lacked the necessary skills or patience to work with PWDs who sometimes require more attention and support. Some students with disabilities in TVET institutions experienced a deep sense of isolation as they are shunned by students and teachers. Reference was also made to a lack of emotional support from immediate family members and the inability of the education system to recognise and assist with the challenges being experienced by the PWDs.

Having an inability to communicate via traditional methods has a tendency to fuel negative perceptions about PWDs. Participants are assumed to be unable to understand and are therefore considered unintelligent. Participants of the FGDs spoke about numerous occasions of being bullied, called derogatory names or laughed and jeered at and generally being discriminated against both in the training institution or in the workplace, further discouraging participation.

Box 3: Male Participant, Grenada

A male participant indicated that he was stigmatized, people in the village referred to him as being “invalid/retarded” and said that “invalids were not supposed to work”.

Negative attitudes and prejudice within society continue to keep PWDs from securing training and employment and make them dependent upon their families or on government’s social protection programmes, if available in their home country.

3.2 Environmental Barriers

During the FGDs, the young people highlighted a number of factors in their own environment which barred them from accessing training and employment. One of the biggest challenges is an inability to navigate their way around training institutions or places of work, for example buildings not having ramps, corridors being too narrow, and elevators being inaccessible.

Box 4: Female Participant, St Vincent

“There is accessibility via wheelchair to some buildings but not inside the building. I am a university graduate with a first degree in bio-technology and micro-biology, however, I was not awarded employment in the labs [medical laboratory] because it could not accommodate my wheelchair, neither was there adequate bathroom facility. I was placed at another institution which is wheelchair accessible but just doesn’t match my skill set, there I am restricted to the first floor.”

Furthermore, the participants indicated that suitable transportation for PWDs is either unavailable publicly or inaccessible at a high cost privately. Appropriate and accessible transportation is an essential service for the effective participation of PWDs and their families in society.

Training and work environments were described as inadequate to facilitate effective communication and access to information. One of the biggest setbacks currently experienced by the participants is the inadequacy of sign language services and other assistive communication technologies that are offered in training facilities and in the workplace. This often leads to missed opportunities to attend training courses, misinformation being gathered during training courses or the inability to engage in employment. The lack of sign language services and other assistive communication technologies is further extended to public health care facilities and security services.

3.3 Institutional Barriers

The principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination mean it is not only necessary to have policies in support of the inclusion of persons with disabilities but also to ensure those policies are adhered to and are being implemented. The FGDs suggest that there is need to integrate disability concerns and experiences more systematically into the design, adoption, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of national and sector policies and strategies.

Box 5: Female Participant, St Vincent

“Authorities are more concerned with the changes that are required to be made to the infrastructure instead of the benefits that can be made available to the person and the contribution to development the person can make if granted the access.”

The participants’ responses highlight systems-wide deficiencies which affect the participation of PWDs in training and in the workplace. Furthermore, the FGDs revealed that PWDs are rarely consulted or included in making decisions that directly impact their well being and this extends from the training room to the policy level.

Box 6: Male Participants, Grenada

Two male participants indicated they are paid less because of their disabilities even when they gave the same or more effort to complete the task.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Improving Knowledge, Attitudes ...

Negative attitudes, perceptions, and false assumptions about the capabilities of PWDs are a major barrier they face in accessing mainstream skills programmes and seeking gainful employment. Informed by the FGDs, the SkYE programme can play an important supporting role in changing these attitudes, perceptions and behaviours around inclusion of PWDs. Key target stakeholder groups where the SkYE programme could have some influence include:

- National Training Authorities
- Employers
- Fellow employees
- Training Institutions
- Fellow students
- Families/Care givers

By engaging with these stakeholders the SkYE programme could provide awareness training and conduct behavioural change communication activities. This could facilitate a better understanding that PWDs are able to make valuable contributions in the school environment, in the workplace and in wider society. These activities can help shift perceptions and attitudes away from PWDs' inabilities and help focus on their abilities. Awareness raising and advocacy work should help change the stigma these young people experience and showcase examples of young PWDs who have been able to gain their independence.

4.2 ... and Practice

Further advocacy and social mobilisation by the programme could work to foster better enabling environments where PWDs do not have restricted access to information, training, and employment. This could include training of trainers to better identify, communicate with and manage students with disabilities so they do not get left behind. Further engagement can be made with employers to demonstrate the benefits of providing an inclusive workspace and sensitising staff.

Finally, at the TVET institutional level the SkYE programme could be pivotal in advocating for the review of education policies, strategic plans and budgets to make TVET more inclusive. Existing training facilities and curricula need adaptation to ensure they are more inclusive of PWDs, the latter to include review of assessment processes to provide equal opportunity of success. PWDs' psychosocial support needs will also require boosting on site. New constructions must be accessible and appropriate transport assistance should be part of the package of support available.

SkYE can support with the identification of change champions at various levels of the TVET system who can help ensure that PWDs are continually at the centre of decision making processes.

5 Conclusion

Hosting the FGDs provided an opportunity for young PWDs to share their stories and provide an insight into living with disabilities. What is clearly evident from the FGDs is that these young people are keen to engage in training and subsequently paid work. Employment is important to PWDs. It provides a pathway to independence, reduces the added pressure on their families and provides an opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the national development of their respective islands. However, as highlighted in the discussions, the attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers they face significantly hinder their aspirations. These barriers include stigma and negative perceptions about their abilities. PWDs struggle to gain equitable access to information, adequate training and employment and have to navigate institutional systems that do not meet their needs. Many of these PWDs have shown resilience and ingenuity, by either working through the system or teaching themselves to be able to gain employment or even become self-employed. The SkYE programme can play a key role in advocating for the removal of the barriers faced by PWDs. By engaging with the programme's key stakeholders through awareness raising and behavioural change activities, SkYE can promote the inclusion of PWDs in society.