

**[ENHANCING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH AWARENESS: MMU STUDENTS'
PERCEPTIONS OF PRISONER REHABILITATION AND PROGRAM
DEVELOPMENT FOR SOCIETAL INCLUSION]**

**MEMPERKASA Keadilan Sosial Melalui Kesedaran: Persepsi
Pelajar MMU Terhadap Pemulihan Banduan dan Pembangunan
Program Bagi Penyertaan Sosial**

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Abstract

Social justice emphasizes fairness, equity, and the inclusion of marginalized groups, including former prisoners who often face stigma and limited opportunities after release. This conceptual paper examines Multimedia University (MMU) students' perceptions of prisoner rehabilitation and explores the development of an awareness program aimed at strengthening societal acceptance and reducing stigmatization of ex-offenders. Drawing on contemporary literature on rehabilitation, restorative justice, and youth attitudes, the study highlights the critical role of university students as agents of social change. The proposed framework integrates social justice principles, awareness-based interventions, and student perceptions to illustrate how educational exposure can shape empathy, challenge negative stereotypes, and enhance support for reintegration initiatives. This paper argues that structured awareness programs in higher education can foster positive attitudes toward ex-offenders, promote inclusive social development, and contribute to national efforts in rehabilitation policy. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are discussed to strengthen rehabilitative approaches within the Malaysian context.

Keywords: social justice, prisoner rehabilitation, awareness program, youth perception, reintegration, stigma reduction.

Abstrak

Keadilan sosial menekankan prinsip keadilan, kesaksamaan dan penglibatan kumpulan terpinggir, termasuk bekas banduan yang sering berdepan stigma serta peluang yang terhad selepas dibebaskan. Kertas konseptual ini meneliti persepsi pelajar Universiti Multimedia (MMU) terhadap pemulihan banduan dan mengkaji pembangunan satu program kesedaran yang bertujuan mengukuhkan penerimaan masyarakat serta mengurangkan stigmatisasi terhadap bekas pesalah. Berasaskan literatur kontemporari tentang pemulihan, keadilan restoratif, dan sikap belia, kajian ini menyoroti peranan penting pelajar universiti sebagai agen perubahan sosial. Kerangka yang dicadangkan mengintegrasikan prinsip keadilan sosial, intervensi berasaskan kesedaran, serta persepsi pelajar bagi menggambarkan bagaimana pendedahan pendidikan dapat membentuk empati, mencabar stereotaip negatif, dan meningkatkan sokongan terhadap inisiatif reintegrasi. Kertas ini berhujah bahawa program kesedaran yang berstruktur dalam pendidikan tinggi mampu memupuk sikap positif terhadap bekas pesalah, menggalakkan pembangunan sosial yang inklusif, dan menyumbang kepada usaha nasional dalam dasar pemulihan. Implikasi terhadap teori, amalan, dan penyelidikan masa hadapan turut dibincangkan bagi memperkukuh pendekatan rehabilitatif dalam konteks Malaysia.

Kata kunci: keadilan sosial, pemulihan banduan, program kesedaran, persepsi belia, reintegrasi, pengurangan stigma

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INTRODUCTION

Social justice is a foundational principle that promotes fairness, equity and the equal distribution of opportunities within society. It emphasizes the need to protect and uplift marginalized populations, including former prisoners who continue to face stigma and social rejection despite having completed their sentences (Rawls, 1971; Fraser, 2008). The process of prisoner rehabilitation seeks to address this challenge by equipping inmates with vocational skills, psychosocial support and moral guidance to facilitate their reintegration into society (Hucklesby and Wahidin, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these efforts is strongly influenced by public perceptions. Negative attitudes, fear and societal prejudice often create substantial barriers to employment, education and social inclusion for ex-offenders, which in turn heightens their vulnerability to recidivism (Farrall and Calverley, 2021).

Globally, scholars have emphasized that public awareness is essential for shaping societal support for rehabilitative efforts and reducing stigma associated with former prisoners. Positive societal perceptions are linked to improved reintegration outcomes, greater acceptance of restorative justice practices and enhanced community safety (Cullen, Jonson and Nagin, 2020). In Malaysia, the Prison Department has implemented various rehabilitative strategies including community-based corrections and reintegration programs designed to restore ex-prisoners as productive members of society (Jabatan Penjara Malaysia, 2022). Despite these initiatives, public misconceptions and cultural stereotypes remain widespread, indicating the need for stronger educational approaches that engage communities, especially youth, in discussions about rehabilitation and social inclusion (Ismail and Bidin, 2020; Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2019).

University students represent a crucial demographic in this discourse. As future policymakers, professionals and societal influencers, their perceptions hold significant implications for shaping the future of social justice and rehabilitation policies. Studies suggest that educational exposure can foster empathy, reduce prejudice and encourage critical understanding of social issues among young adults (Maruna, 2021). Multimedia University provides a relevant context for investigating how students conceptualize prisoner rehabilitation, as its diverse academic environment and student population mirror broader societal attitudes. Despite the importance of youth perceptions, empirical research on Malaysian university

students' views on prisoner rehabilitation remains limited. This gap highlights the need for further inquiry that integrates social justice frameworks with awareness-based learning strategies.

This study aims to explore MMU students' perceptions of prisoner rehabilitation and examine how an awareness program can enhance their understanding of reintegration and reduce stigma toward ex-offenders. The paper draws on contemporary literature, restorative justice principles and social justice theory to propose a conceptual framework that links students' perceptions with structured awareness interventions (Fraser, 2008). Through this approach, the study underscores the potential of higher education to nurture informed, compassionate and socially responsible individuals who are capable of contributing to a more just and inclusive society. The investigation also aligns with national priorities in promoting humane treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners as emphasized in Malaysian policy documents (Kementerian Dalam Negeri Malaysia, 2021).

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

Social justice refers to the fair distribution of rights, opportunities and resources within society. It emphasizes equality, human dignity and the responsibility to protect marginalized groups including individuals who have been incarcerated. According to Rawls (1971), social justice is grounded in principles of fairness that prioritize the well-being of disadvantaged communities. Fraser (2008) further explains that social justice involves both redistribution of resources and recognition of marginalized identities. Within this study, social justice forms the normative foundation for understanding the responsibility of society to support ex-prisoners and facilitate their reintegration.

Prisoner rehabilitation encompasses the processes and programs designed to support inmates in developing personal, vocational and social competencies necessary for successful reintegration. Rehabilitation aims to reduce reoffending through education, skill training, counselling and community support initiatives (Cullen, Jonson and Nagin, 2020). In Malaysia, rehabilitation incorporates moral education, Islamic guidance and restorative justice principles as outlined by the Prison Department (Jabatan Penjara Malaysia, 2022). Research indicates that effective rehabilitation is closely linked to societal acceptance and that negative public perceptions can hinder reintegration efforts (Farrall and Calverley, 2021).

Awareness programs refer to structured educational interventions that increase understanding, promote empathy and reduce stigma toward marginalized groups. Awareness initiatives related to rehabilitation aim to correct misconceptions, foster positive attitudes and enhance public willingness to engage with reintegration efforts (Maruna, 2021). Within university settings, awareness programs help students connect theoretical knowledge with social realities, enabling them to appreciate the importance of equitable treatment and restorative justice (Tewksbury and Lees, 2007). These programs serve as an essential component in shaping societal perceptions of ex-offenders.

Students' perceptions represent the beliefs, attitudes and interpretations that university students hold regarding prisoner rehabilitation. These perceptions influence how young adults evaluate fairness, responsibility and social inclusion. Studies show that students' perceptions are shaped by education, media exposure, personal values and religious beliefs (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2019; Zulkifli, Rahman and Ismail, 2023). Positive perceptions promote acceptance and support for reintegration, while negative perceptions perpetuate stigma and social exclusion. Understanding students' perceptions is therefore crucial for designing awareness programs that effectively promote social justice and reduce discriminatory attitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of social justice centers on fairness, equity and the protection of marginalized populations. Scholars such as Rawls (1971) and Fraser (2008) highlight that social justice

involves both the provision of equal opportunities and the recognition of structural inequalities affecting vulnerable groups. Former prisoners represent one of the most marginalized segments of society due to their prolonged exposure to stigma, social labeling and exclusion even after serving their sentences. Research indicates that negative societal perceptions significantly hinder reintegration efforts, reinforcing cycles of poverty, unemployment and recidivism (Farrall and Calverley, 2021). Global literature emphasizes that achieving social justice for ex-prisoners requires both institutional rehabilitation initiatives and transformation of public attitudes (Goffman, 1963; Link and Phelan, 2001).

Rehabilitation is a multidimensional process that prepares prisoners for social reintegration through skill development, moral guidance and psychological support. Cullen, Jonson and Nagin (2020) assert that rehabilitative strategies are more effective than punitive approaches in reducing recidivism and improving long-term social outcomes. Restorative justice principles strengthen this approach by focusing on repairing harm and restoring individuals as positive contributors to society (Maruna, 2021). In the Malaysian context, the Prison Department has expanded rehabilitation through community-based corrections, vocational training and reintegration programs that emphasize both personal transformation and societal acceptance (Jabatan Penjara Malaysia, 2022). Despite these efforts, studies show that reintegration success is strongly connected to the willingness of society to accept former prisoners (Ismail and Bidin, 2020).

University students play a pivotal role in shaping societal narratives surrounding justice and rehabilitation. Literature consistently demonstrates that youth attitudes are influenced by educational exposure, critical thinking skills, personal beliefs and awareness of social issues (Tewksbury and Lees, 2007). Education can cultivate empathy, reduce prejudice and strengthen support for social justice initiatives (Maruna, 2021). Studies conducted in Malaysia reveal that young adults generally demonstrate openness toward inclusive social practices but may lack specific knowledge regarding prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2019). This gap indicates a need for structured academic and awareness programs that deepen students' understanding of the challenges faced by ex-prisoners and promote positive societal engagement.

Several Malaysian studies underscore persistent social stigma as a major barrier to the reintegration of former prisoners. Employers, communities and even family members may hold negative perceptions that limit opportunities for ex-offenders (Abdul Latif and Noor, 2019; Abdullah and Yahya, 2021). Reintegration challenges include difficulty securing stable employment, limited social networks and structural discrimination that restricts mobility and access to services (Ismail and Bidin, 2020). These challenges can undermine rehabilitation outcomes, thereby increasing the likelihood of recidivism. Although various governmental agencies have introduced reintegration initiatives, scholars argue that societal acceptance remains insufficient and requires targeted efforts to address misinformation and fear (Kementerian Dalam Negeri Malaysia, 2021).

Awareness programs have been identified as effective mechanisms for transforming public perceptions and fostering inclusive attitudes. International and local studies demonstrate that awareness initiatives can improve understanding of marginalized groups, reduce stereotyping and encourage pro-social behaviour (Fraser, 2008; Maruna, 2021). Within university settings, awareness programs can incorporate workshops, dialogues, experiential learning and community engagement to help students better grasp the complexities of prisoner rehabilitation. Such programs align with the findings of Zulkifli, Rahman and Ismail (2023), which reveal that Malaysian youth respond positively to structured learning opportunities related to social justice issues.

Although global literature acknowledges the importance of public and youth attitudes towards rehabilitation, limited empirical research in Malaysia specifically examines university students' perceptions of prisoner rehabilitation and their readiness to participate in awareness programs. Most existing studies focus on public perception or the operational aspects of rehabilitation programs, leaving a gap concerning the role of youth in shaping societal acceptance. Addressing this gap is essential for strengthening national rehabilitation strategies and promoting social inclusion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework in this study provides an integrated lens for understanding the variables that shape MMU students' perceptions of prisoner rehabilitation and the development of an awareness program designed to strengthen social justice. By combining theoretical perspectives from social justice, restorative justice, stigma theory and education, the framework explains how awareness initiatives can influence youth attitudes and contribute to wider societal acceptance of ex-offenders. This framework forms the foundation upon which the study builds its argument for the importance of education in reshaping perceptions and reducing negative stereotypes.

At the core of the framework is the construct of social justice, which serves as the overarching principle that guides the study. Social justice refers to fairness, equality and the just distribution of opportunities, rights and resources in society. Rawls (1971) conceptualizes justice as fairness, emphasizing that a just society must prioritize the needs of marginalized groups, including individuals who have experienced incarceration. The inclusion of social justice in this study highlights the moral and societal responsibility to support former prisoners' reintegration and to challenge discriminatory attitudes that hinder their acceptance.

The reintegration of former prisoners depends significantly on public attitudes toward rehabilitation. Social justice operates in this framework as a long-term societal goal that is achievable when communities demonstrate greater empathy, understanding and willingness to offer second chances. Fraser (2008) further reinforces this view by arguing that social justice involves both the redistribution of opportunities and the recognition of marginalized identities. These theoretical foundations justify the need for awareness programs that seek to shift public perception and increase acceptance of rehabilitation efforts.

A second major construct in the framework is prisoner rehabilitation. Rehabilitation encompasses structured programs that aim to prepare former inmates for a meaningful return to society. These programs include vocational training, psychological support, counselling, education and moral guidance intended to reduce recidivism and promote positive personal change. Cullen et al. (2020) argue that rehabilitative approaches are more effective than punitive measures in deterring future crime. The concept of rehabilitation in this framework is therefore central to understanding how ex-offenders can rebuild their lives and reintegrate into the community.

In Malaysia, rehabilitation is supported by initiatives such as the Community Corrections program under the Prison Department, which provides supervised reintegration pathways and skill-building opportunities for former inmates (Prison Department of Malaysia, 2022). However, although institutional programs exist, their success is largely dependent on public perception. Negative attitudes in society toward former prisoners can undermine rehabilitation outcomes, restrict employment opportunities and reinforce cycles of social exclusion. The framework therefore positions rehabilitation as essential but notes its dependency on societal acceptance.

Awareness programs form the third construct in the framework. Awareness programs are educational interventions designed to increase public understanding of social issues, promote empathy and challenge stigma against marginalized groups. Maruna (2021) highlights that awareness-based initiatives can correct misconceptions and foster prosocial behaviour, especially among young adults. In this study, awareness programs aim to expose students to accurate information about rehabilitation processes, the challenges faced by former prisoners and the social importance of reintegration. These programs work as catalysts for attitude change.

Through interactive learning experiences such as workshops, dialogues, case analyses and multimedia engagement, awareness programs can help students develop deeper sensitivity and critical thinking regarding justice-related issues. Tewksbury and Lees (2007) emphasize that exposure to education on correctional systems significantly influences how young adults perceive offenders and rehabilitation. Within this framework, awareness programs are conceptualized as the mechanism that directly influences student perceptions by expanding their knowledge and nurturing empathy.

The perceptions of MMU students serve as the fourth construct and act as the mediating variable within the framework. Students' perceptions include their beliefs, attitudes and interpretations regarding prisoner rehabilitation, fairness and second chances. Studies show that youth attitudes are shaped by educational exposure, media portrayals, cultural norms and personal experiences (Zulkifli et al., 2023). Positive perceptions can lead to greater acceptance of ex-prisoners and stronger support for reintegration initiatives, whereas negative perceptions can perpetuate stigma and hinder rehabilitation efforts.

In this conceptualization, student perceptions play a crucial intermediary role. Awareness programs are expected to reshape perceptions by providing accurate knowledge and countering stereotypes. When perceptions improve, students become more supportive of rehabilitation, more open to engaging with reintegration initiatives and more likely to advocate for fair treatment of former prisoners. In this way, the framework situates young adults as influential actors whose attitudes can shape societal responses to rehabilitation and justice.

The interconnected relationship among these constructs culminates in the expected outcomes of reduced stigma and increased societal acceptance of ex-offenders. These outcomes then contribute to broader social justice impact by fostering inclusive communities and ensuring equitable opportunities for former prisoners. The framework therefore illustrates a dynamic progression in which awareness enhances perceptions, improved perceptions strengthen acceptance of rehabilitation and enhanced acceptance promotes social justice. Through this model, the study demonstrates how education and awareness among university students can become powerful drivers of positive societal change.

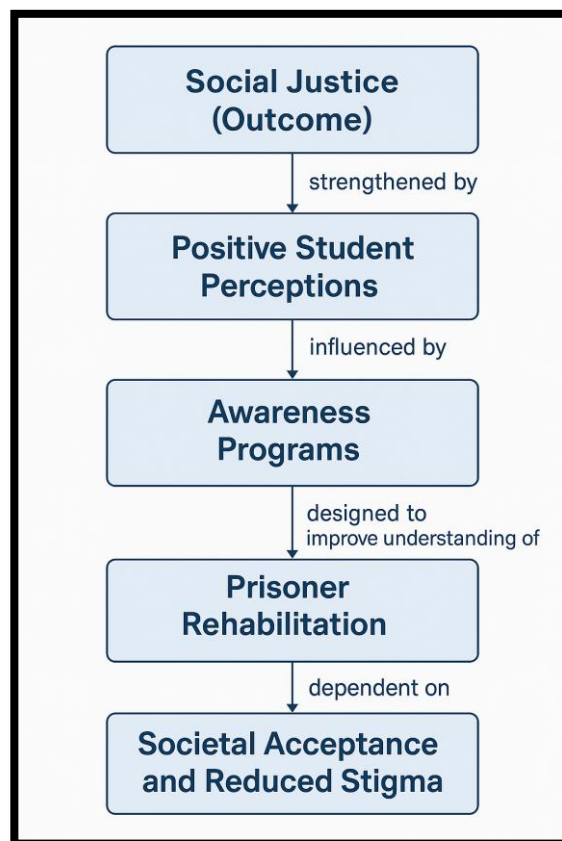


Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, illustrating the sequential relationship between awareness programs, student perceptions, prisoner rehabilitation and the broader goal of achieving social justice through increased societal acceptance and reduced stigma toward former prisoners.

Figure 1 illustrates the overall conceptual framework that guides this study. The model demonstrates a sequential pathway beginning with awareness programs designed to improve

students' understanding of prisoner rehabilitation. When students are exposed to structured awareness initiatives, their knowledge, empathy and critical awareness toward ex-offenders increase, which in turn helps shape more positive perceptions. These student perceptions act as a mediating construct, meaning that the effectiveness of awareness programs depends on how students internalize and interpret the information they receive. As student perceptions become more positive, they contribute to greater societal acceptance of former prisoners and a reduction in stigma. This increased acceptance strengthens the effectiveness of prisoner rehabilitation efforts, as reintegration outcomes are closely tied to community support and willingness to offer second chances. Ultimately, this process contributes to the overarching goal of social justice, which emphasizes fairness, equality and the equitable treatment of marginalized individuals, including ex-prisoners. The figure therefore highlights how educational interventions at the university level can influence broader social attitudes and foster a more inclusive society by bridging awareness, perception and rehabilitation.

CONCEPTUAL METHODOLOGY

The conceptual methodology for this study outlines the philosophical orientation, research logic and methodological structure used to examine MMU students' perceptions of prisoner rehabilitation and the development of an awareness program that promotes social justice. This study is positioned within a constructivist paradigm which assumes that individuals construct meaning based on their experiences, social environment and educational exposure. Such a perspective is suitable for exploring how students interpret issues of reintegration, stigma and fairness in relation to former prisoners. Constructivism also supports the use of awareness-based interventions to reshape understanding, as knowledge is viewed as something that evolves through engagement and reflection rather than being transmitted passively.

Within this paradigm, the methodology adopts a conceptual design rather than an empirical one. The purpose of a conceptual methodology is to examine relationships between constructs by synthesizing theoretical perspectives, previous research and practical implications. In this study, the conceptual approach integrates existing literature on social justice, restorative justice, prisoner rehabilitation, stigma theory and youth attitudes. The integration of these bodies of knowledge guides the development of a model that explains how awareness programs can influence students' perceptions and contribute to social acceptance of ex-offenders.

The methodological process begins with an extensive review of scholarly literature to identify key constructs relevant to prisoner rehabilitation and public attitudes. Sources include criminology, sociology, Islamic studies, social psychology and educational research. This body of literature provides the foundation for conceptualizing the role of students in shaping societal narratives about rehabilitation. The review also identifies gaps in current research, particularly regarding the limited understanding of how Malaysian university students perceive prisoner rehabilitation and how targeted awareness interventions could influence these perceptions.

Following the identification of key constructs, the methodology proceeds with the development of a conceptual framework. This framework maps the theoretical relationships between social justice, awareness programs, student perceptions and prisoner rehabilitation. The model does not test hypotheses empirically but instead establishes logical pathways supported by theory and prior research. The framework is used to explain how awareness programs function as educational mechanisms that can improve understanding, reduce stigma and foster support for reintegration.

The next stage of the conceptual methodology involves designing the structure of the proposed awareness program. Although not implemented empirically in this paper, the awareness program is conceptually modeled based on successful approaches documented in past studies. These include interactive workshops, guest lectures, reflective discussions and multimedia learning tools. The conceptualization of this program draws from restorative justice education and stigma reduction strategies which emphasize empathy building, narrative exposure and critical engagement with social issues.

The methodology also incorporates an analytical component that explains how changes in student perceptions can lead to broader societal outcomes. Using established theories such as labeling theory, stigma management and desistance theory, the study conceptualizes the link between positive attitudes among young adults and improved reintegration prospects for ex-prisoners. These theoretical foundations serve as justification for targeting university students as a key population in strengthening social justice.

Ethical considerations form an important part of the conceptual methodology even though no direct data collection is conducted. The methodology emphasizes respect for sensitive issues related to incarceration, the importance of accurate representation and the need to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The discussion of rehabilitation and ex-prisoners is grounded in evidence-based literature and framed within principles of justice, dignity and compassion.

Finally, the conceptual methodology outlines the anticipated implications of the model. By demonstrating how awareness programs can shape perceptions and ultimately support rehabilitation, this study contributes to theoretical discourse on social justice and practical strategies for reintegration in Malaysia. The conceptual model offers a foundation for future empirical studies that may test the framework or implement and evaluate awareness programs in higher education institutions.

DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis in this conceptual study is grounded in the synthesis of existing literature, theoretical models and documented evidence on youth perceptions, prisoner rehabilitation and social justice. Instead of empirical statistical testing, this study employs a conceptual analytical strategy that draws from patterns in prior research to interpret how awareness programs may shape MMU students' perceptions toward ex-offenders. The analysis is structured around key themes that emerged from scholarly studies relating to stigma, public attitudes, youth awareness and the effectiveness of rehabilitative initiatives. These themes form the basis for deducing the expected findings of the proposed framework and linking them to broader discussions within criminological and social justice literature.

The conceptual analysis highlights that university students generally demonstrate openness to the principles of fairness, equality and second chances when provided with adequate exposure to social justice education. Previous studies indicate that young adults often express positive attitudes toward rehabilitation when they understand the goals and societal benefits of reintegration programs (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2019). Within the Malaysian context, research shows that young people are influenced by moral values, religious beliefs and community narratives that encourage forgiveness and reform. These findings suggest that MMU students are likely to respond positively to awareness programs that introduce them to the realities of prison life, the challenges of reintegration and the importance of reducing stigma.

A central finding that emerges from the conceptual reasoning is that awareness programs serve as a powerful mechanism in shaping student perceptions. Evidence from social psychology and educational studies demonstrates that awareness efforts reduce prejudice and promote empathy by exposing individuals to information that challenges stereotypes (Fraser, 2008; Maruna, 2021). Through structured activities such as workshops, dialogues and multimedia presentations, students develop more informed and compassionate perspectives toward marginalized groups. Applying this logic to the context of MMU, awareness programs are expected to cultivate more positive perceptions of former prisoners by dispelling misconceptions, clarifying the aims of rehabilitation and emphasizing societal responsibilities.

The conceptual analysis also identifies the significant role of student perceptions as a mediating factor in shaping public acceptance of ex-prisoners. The literature consistently shows that positive perceptions among young adults can influence broader community attitudes, as youth often act as carriers of new social norms (Zulkifli et al., 2023). When

students develop a supportive stance toward rehabilitation, they are more likely to advocate for inclusive policies, challenge discriminatory behaviour and promote reintegration efforts within their social circles. As such, MMU students' perceptions become a critical determinant of whether awareness programs achieve their intended outcomes in reducing stigma.

Another key discussion that arises from the conceptual analysis concerns the link between societal acceptance and the success of rehabilitation programs. Scholars assert that reintegration cannot be fully realized without community support, as former prisoners depend on societal willingness to provide employment opportunities, social networks and second chances (Ismail and Bidin, 2020). The framework proposed in this study positions student-driven acceptance as a catalyst for broader societal change. When awareness programs improve student perceptions, this acceptance radiates outward, contributing to a more supportive environment for ex-offenders.

The conceptual findings further align with restorative justice principles, which emphasize healing, reconciliation and the transformation of community attitudes. Education plays a critical role in fostering these principles by helping individuals understand the moral and social value of reintegration (Maruna, 2021). In this sense, the awareness program conceptualized in this study is not only an educational intervention but also a restorative mechanism that promotes empathy and justice-oriented thinking among students. The discussion indicates that integrating restorative justice themes into awareness content can deepen students' understanding of the human potential for reform.

Additionally, the conceptual analysis reveals that social justice acts as the ultimate outcome of the interactions between awareness, perception and acceptance. When students develop informed perceptions and demonstrate willingness to support reintegration initiatives, they help advance social justice by reducing discrimination and promoting inclusivity. This aligns with Rawls' (1971) notion that justice requires equitable treatment of marginalized individuals. The discussion thus positions student awareness as a crucial driver in achieving social justice outcomes within the context of prisoner rehabilitation.

The analysis also acknowledges potential challenges. Awareness programs may encounter resistance from students who hold strong preconceived beliefs shaped by media portrayals or cultural narratives. Negative depictions of prisoners in popular media often reinforce fear and distrust, making it necessary for awareness programs to include critical media literacy components (Goffman, 1963). The discussion highlights that addressing these misconceptions is essential for ensuring that awareness efforts translate into meaningful attitudinal change.

Overall, the discussion illustrates that the conceptual framework offers a coherent and theoretically grounded pathway through which awareness programs influence perceptions, perceptions influence acceptance and acceptance contributes to social justice. The synthesis of past literature supports the conclusion that educational interventions targeting university students can play a transformative role in promoting rehabilitation and reducing stigma toward former prisoners. These conceptual findings reinforce the significance of integrating awareness-based modules into higher education as part of national strategies to strengthen reintegration and social harmony.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social justice in the context of prisoner rehabilitation can be significantly strengthened through awareness-based educational initiatives targeting university students. By integrating theoretical insights from social justice, restorative justice and stigma reduction, the proposed conceptual framework demonstrates that awareness programs play a central role in shaping students' perceptions toward ex-offenders. When students are exposed to accurate information, meaningful narratives and structured learning experiences, their understanding of rehabilitation becomes more holistic, empathetic and aligned with principles

of fairness and compassion. These improved perceptions serve as a catalyst for broader societal acceptance, which is essential for the success of reintegration efforts.

The conceptual synthesis suggests that prisoner rehabilitation cannot succeed solely through institutional programs; it also requires the active support of communities. Young adults, particularly university students, represent an influential segment of society whose attitudes and actions can help reduce stigma and encourage inclusive social practices. As future professionals and policymakers, their acceptance of ex-prisoners contributes directly to a more just and equitable social environment. The findings of this conceptual analysis therefore emphasize the importance of embedding awareness programs within higher education as a proactive strategy for promoting social justice.

Furthermore, this study highlights the need for collaborative efforts among educational institutions, rehabilitation agencies and community stakeholders. By fostering partnerships that support awareness building, society can collectively reduce discriminatory attitudes and provide former prisoners with greater opportunities for reintegration. Although this study is conceptual in nature, it lays the groundwork for future empirical research to test the proposed framework, evaluate awareness interventions and explore how student-driven initiatives can further advance social justice in Malaysia.

Overall, the study reinforces the idea that social justice is not merely a theoretical aspiration but a practical commitment that requires informed attitudes, empathetic engagement and collective societal responsibility. Through awareness, understanding and acceptance, communities can help restore dignity to former prisoners and support their transformation into productive members of society. The conceptual framework presented here provides a valuable foundation for strengthening rehabilitation efforts and guiding future research, policy development and educational practice in the pursuit of a more inclusive and compassionate society.

DISCUSSION

The discussion section interprets the conceptual findings of this study in relation to the research objectives, theoretical foundations and the proposed conceptual framework. Although empirical data were not collected, the discussion draws from established research to explain how MMU students' perceptions of prisoner rehabilitation can be shaped through awareness programs and how these perceptions contribute to broader goals of social justice. This interpretive analysis deepens the understanding of how educational interventions can influence youth attitudes, challenge societal stigma and support reintegration efforts for former prisoners.

The first key point emerging from the analysis concerns the generally positive orientation of young adults toward rehabilitation when they are exposed to accurate information and meaningful narratives. This tendency aligns with constructivist learning theory, which posits that individuals' beliefs and attitudes evolve through interaction with new knowledge, reflection and guided learning. Awareness programs therefore act as catalysts that help students reconstruct their understanding of ex-prisoners, shifting perceptions from punitive to restorative. This shift supports the conceptual framework's assertion that student perceptions are central mediators connecting awareness interventions to social justice outcomes.

Another important element in the discussion is the influence of moral and religious values, which consistently appear in the literature as motivators for supportive attitudes toward rehabilitation. In the Malaysian context, values grounded in compassion, mercy and the possibility of personal transformation provide a meaningful foundation for students to empathize with ex-offenders. These values also align with restorative justice principles that emphasize healing, reconciliation and second chances. This connection reinforces the argument that awareness programs should integrate ethical and value-based components to strengthen students' engagement with rehabilitation issues.

Media influence is also significant in shaping perceptions. Negative portrayals of prisoners often reinforce fear, distrust and stereotypes that hinder reintegration. The

conceptual findings suggest that students may be susceptible to such portrayals unless provided with tools to critically evaluate media narratives. This underscores the need for awareness programs to include media literacy elements, enabling students to distinguish between sensationalized depictions of crime and the real-life experiences of individuals undergoing rehabilitation. Addressing media effects is essential for breaking down stigmatization and encouraging more balanced attitudes.

A notable outcome of the analysis is the readiness of students to participate in awareness initiatives and contribute to social change. This aligns with studies showing that young adults are often motivated by social responsibility and a desire to promote fairness. Their willingness to join awareness efforts indicates strong potential for peer-based advocacy, where students influence their social circles by promoting messages of acceptance and justice. This peer influence is consistent with the conceptual framework, which positions student perceptions as drivers of broader societal attitudes.

The discussion also highlights that awareness programs can have ripple effects beyond the university setting. When students adopt positive, informed perspectives on rehabilitation, they carry these attitudes into their communities and future workplaces. In this way, awareness programs not only educate individuals but also contribute to long-term cultural shifts in how society views former prisoners. This outcome supports the framework's view that achieving social justice requires collective attitudinal change facilitated by informed and empathetic individuals.

Finally, the discussion identifies areas where gaps remain. While awareness programs show promise as tools for reducing stigma, their long-term impact depends on continuity, institutional support and collaboration with community partners. Sustainable change requires ongoing engagement rather than one-off initiatives. Universities, government agencies and rehabilitation centres must work together to design initiatives that reinforce learning, encourage dialogue and build meaningful relationships between students and reintegration stakeholders.

Overall, the discussion supports the conceptual framework by demonstrating how awareness programs can transform perceptions, perceptions can influence acceptance and acceptance can promote social justice. The findings reinforce the argument that students play a critical role in shaping societal attitudes toward ex-prisoners and that educational institutions have a responsibility to support this transformation. By cultivating empathy, critical awareness and informed understanding, awareness programs can serve as powerful tools in advancing reintegration efforts and promoting a more just and inclusive society.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

The conceptual framework proposed in this study contributes to existing scholarship by clarifying the relationships between awareness, perception and social acceptance of former prisoners. It extends the literature on social justice by demonstrating how educational exposure functions as a mediating mechanism that shapes youth understanding of rehabilitation. The integration of constructivist learning theory, restorative justice principles and stigma theory reinforces the notion that attitudes toward marginalized groups are not static but can be transformed through intentional educational interventions. This study also contributes theoretically by positioning university students as active agents in shaping justice-oriented social change, thus expanding youth-focused research within criminology and social justice fields. Additionally, it highlights the importance of interlinking psychological, social and educational dimensions in discussions of reintegration, offering a multi-layered conceptualisation of how stigma reduction can be achieved.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings underscore the value of implementing structured awareness programs in higher education institutions. Universities such as MMU can play an influential role by integrating rehabilitation-related content into academic courses, co-curricular programs and student engagement activities. Awareness programs that incorporate interactive workshops, reflective discussions, guest speakers from correctional institutions and multimedia learning tools can enhance students' understanding of rehabilitation and promote empathy toward ex-offenders. The findings suggest that such exposure may increase students' willingness to support second-chance initiatives, volunteer in community reintegration efforts and challenge stigma among their peers. Furthermore, the study highlights the potential of peer influence as a powerful tool for changing campus culture, as positively informed students can advocate for social inclusion within their networks.

Policy Implications

From a policy perspective, the study provides insights that can support national reintegration and social justice agendas. Policymakers can collaborate with universities to develop long-term awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and promoting public acceptance of rehabilitation programs. The conceptual framework suggests that youth-centered initiatives should be integrated into national rehabilitation strategies, recognizing students as key stakeholders in future decision-making and community leadership. Government agencies such as the Prison Department of Malaysia can partner with higher education institutions to provide internships, community projects and dialogue sessions that enhance public understanding of correctional reforms. Additionally, policies that promote inclusive hiring practices and anti-stigma campaigns could be strengthened through evidence-informed strategies that emphasize the role of education in changing public attitudes. These policy directions align with Malaysia's broader goals of improving reintegration success and fostering a more just, compassionate and inclusive society.

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