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The Musical Adventures of a Performer-Educator-Researcher



Dr Andrew Filmer is versatile in the arts, combining his musicology training with that of violin and viola performance. Andrew has won commendations and prizes in teaching, public speaking, research, performance, and leadership. He is an associate professor and coordinator of strings at UCSI's Institute of Music and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy of the United Kingdom. Andrew performed and presented at six Congresses and was a past Editor of the Journal of the American Viola Society. His research was presented twice at the University of Cambridge and he was a scholar-in-residence there in early 2023.

Teaching and performance at the Monteverdi Conservatory in Bolzano, Italy, 13 January 2026, and presentation and performance at the 50th International Viola Congress in Paris, 19-23 January 2026

The life of a musician is unusually multi-faceted: we spend time on the stage crafting melodies and harmonies, we tell audiences about our research findings, and we also visit other institutions not just for lectures and seminars, but also for specialised masterclasses.



The start of this year brought me first to the town of Bolzano in Italy with activities from morning to night at the Claudio Monteverdi Conservatory. Masterclasses were for individual viola performers, with an audience of their regular teachers, other students and staff. A masterclass therefore has to address instrumental issues for students of very different physiologies, for example: with different finger shapes and neck lengths. At the same time, the educator provides some meta-level insights that would be valuable for those in the audience, which could be also physical; though more often than not, artistic. This, along with observations of cultural factors involved in pedagogy, contribute to the awareness that will be included in a book I am completing on violin and viola pedagogy. Students in Bolzano included international students from China and the Middle East, Italian students from undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as one alumna.



In the afternoon I also presented a seminar to the postgraduate students on how to brainstorm research ideas in the arena of music performance using case studies of my publications, covering journals, music editions and newly commissioned compositions for viola. I had the pleasure of coaching a viola-only ensemble that was slated for the International Viola Congress (IVC) the following week, and the day ended with a concert of this university ensemble, as well as a

couple of pieces I performed with a violinist and pianist. The century-old conservatory had the charm of a cobblestone quadrangle, along with the acoustics of a modern-day concert hall.



The next stop was Florence to continue preparations for the IVC with the Brightfeather Duo: violinist Dr Benjamin Hoffman of Bowling Green University in the United States and Dr Irene Kim, who (among many things) works with famed film music composer Danny Elfman. Collaborating with musicians from half a world away provided me with unique challenges - while the oral research presentation component can be easily coordinated online, we cannot rehearse the performance components until we met in person. Through the Brightfeather connections, we managed to find rehearsal space in Florence to put together an ambitious programme of music that was not just appealing to listeners, but had solid research contribution as well.



Not every part of the international tour went according to plan. Early in the trip, one of the wooden instruments developed an unexpected buzzing sound, likely caused by the changes in air pressure encountered during long-haul travel. A desperate message to the award-winning Malaysian luthier who made my viola received an unusual response:

I could visit an instrument-making workshop in Florence where that same viola was constructed years before. This was the first professional-level viola made by a Malaysian, and the first time this viola has returned to where it was crafted, then under the supervision of a master Italian luthier Michele Mecatti.

Finally, we arrived in Paris for the 50th International Viola Congress, with the theme "Celebrating Legacy and Diversity". My presentation had both an oral and a performance component, and I commissioned several works that were brought to this event that aligned to this theme while adequately representing music of the Southeast Asian region. This included an arrangement of Di Tanjong Katong (At the Cape of Turtles) that was first premiered at UCSI with university colleagues Prof. P'ng Tean Hwa on piano and Ergys Konig on violin, and an arrangement of a newly-discovered work by famed British composer Benjamin Britten that was proposed in the 1950s to a new Malaysia as its national anthem.

Asst. Prof. Dr Kenneth Tam, a composer at the Institute of Music, wrote a new work specifically for the ensemble, titled "A Study of Instantaneous Responses" based on the kompang. I procured a kompang specifically for the project which Dr Tam used during the compositional phase, and I brought this to Paris to demonstrate its sound to the conference attendees.

Beyond using the specific kompang rhythmic features, his work dealt with the relational aspects in a kompang troupe, providing a sociological element to the performance. His composition had flexible elements and required musicians to listen and react to others, producing a certain level of 'unpredictability' that heightened the level of chamber music skills engaged with in this world premiere.



Having performed on the first day of the International Viola Congress, the rest of the event provided opportunities to explore new ideas and experience the newest developments in viola performance, technique, teaching composition and instrument-making. A highlight was a new composition that infused theatrical elements in a work inspired by Samuel Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, composed by Garth Knox with soloist Lawrence Power. In the picture here, you can see the "albatross around the neck" on the soloist with the unusual placement of the orchestra depicting the mariner's great ship on turbulent waters.

Being at an in-person conference provides for more than publication and training – the networking opportunities are considerable and heartwarming. In the picture on the left, you see three generations of violists: on the left is Tony Devroye of the Avalon Quartet, now at Northern Illinois University in the United States with whom I studied viola performance for my master's degree; and my former student Danish Mubin who currently plays at the Théâtre Orchestre Bienne Soleure in Switzerland. At other times, the benefits of a conference are unexpected. A visit to the Monet Museum led me to an encounter with a different type of teaching: composer Tartini learning from the Devil, apparently – allowing me the chance to use this famous painting in my upcoming book without needing additional permission for a photographer's intellectual property.



I also met in person for the first time a doctoral graduate of Newcastle University for whom I was an external examiner, and a Costa Rica-based lecturer whose article I processed as a journal editor a decade ago, and with whom I have since been in productive discussions on curriculum development and a potential online seminar later this year.



My European adventure provided connections to music professionals from five continents, and allowed the distinct opportunity to celebrate the legacy and diversity of music from Southeast Asia through the avenue of a Western classical music instrument. Within UCSI's mission of transformative education, this provided opportunities to see the new frontiers of music for viola and the wider area of bowed strings, evaluate the momentum of certain research streams and connect to a community of doers, thinkers, tinkerers and dreamers.

Cambodia Live-Build Project: Learning Through Making Across Borders



Dr Wong Leong Yee is the Head of Research and Postgraduate Studies at SABE. His work focuses on digital fabrication in interior design, installation, and architecture, with an emphasis on translating computational design into physical outcomes. He explores fabrication techniques across diverse industries to inform design innovation, particularly in the development of complex curvature and material-driven processes. His research is also interested in the intersection of technology, craft and making, with a focus on industrial craft aesthetics and experimental construction approaches.

The Cambodia Live-Build Project was a meaningful international collaboration, bringing together students and educators from Malaysia, Taiwan and Japan in a 19-day immersive design-build experience. The initiative aimed to construct two school units for a rural community in Moung, Cambodia, while offering students a rare opportunity to engage directly with architecture beyond the studio environment.

Participating universities included UCSI University (Malaysia), Shih Chien University (Taiwan), Shizuoka Institute of Science and Technology, Okayama University of Science and Osaka Metropolitan University (Japan). Despite differences in language, culture, and architectural pedagogy, students worked collectively toward a shared goal—transforming design ideas into built reality.

The project was structured as an intensive hands-on process. From the early stages of planning and design rationalisation to material calculation, foundation work, structural framing, partitioning and final enclosure, every step was carried out by the students themselves. Within a remarkably short timeframe, the teams successfully completed the structural frames and building envelopes, demonstrating not only technical capability but also strong coordination and adaptability.



Daily routines were physically demanding. Under the tropical climate, students spent long hours preparing timber structures, cutting joints, assembling frames and resolving construction challenges on-site. Yet, learning did not stop at the end of the workday. Evenings were dedicated to reflection and discussion, where students revisited design decisions, refined details and shared insights gained from the day's construction experience. This continuous cycle of making and reflecting strengthened their understanding of material behaviour, construction sequencing and design feasibility.

One of the most significant aspects of the project was the collaboration with the local Cambodian community. Without a shared verbal language, communication relied heavily on gestures, demonstrations and mutual observation. In this context, the villagers became essential teachers, guiding students in practical building techniques and offering invaluable local knowledge. This exchange challenged conventional perceptions of expertise and repositioned students not as external helpers, but as learners within a broader social and cultural environment.



Beyond technical learning, the live-build experience encouraged students to reconsider architecture as a form of place-making grounded in context. Working outside their familiar urban settings, they were exposed to different ways of living, building and problem-solving. The project highlighted that architecture is not merely about form-making, but about responding meaningfully to people, environment and available resources.

The Cambodia Live-Build Project ultimately demonstrated the value of experiential learning in architectural education. It fostered not only practical skills in construction and teamwork, but also a deeper awareness of cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and social responsibility. Through this shared effort, students gained a new perspective on architecture—one that is shaped as much by hands-on engagement and human connection as it is by design intention.

These lively sessions transformed research into an enjoyable and meaningful learning experience. Rather than seeing research as distant or abstract, the children encountered it through stories, colours and creativity, making knowledge come alive in a way that is both engaging and memorable.

Vincent Ong's Homecoming Tour



Christine Yunn Bing Tan received her Bachelor, Master, and DMA in Piano Pedagogy and Piano Performance from United States. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Music, UCSI University, Malaysia. Christine's interest is in piano duet/duo. She was invited to perform duo-piano recitals in Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan and China. Apart from her teaching role as faculty member at the Institute of Music, she is a well-sought-after adjudicator for piano competitions, examinations and a clinician who has given workshops and seminars on piano pedagogy topics locally and overseas.

At UCSI University, besides her deep passion for teaching, she was the chairwoman of the first UCSI Piano Pedagogy Conference (UCSI PPC) in 2017 and chairwoman of the UCSI University International Piano Festival and Competition (IPFC) since 2020. In addition, she is the head of Praxis, Industry and Community Engagement for the Institute of Music where she oversees and handles all the collaborations with the industries, communities and universities outside of Malaysia.



Deborah Kay Yen Lin, born in Penang, Malaysia, is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Arts Administration and Management at Taipei National University of the Arts. Her work spans artist management, marketing direction and advisory, production, and coordination across international projects with organizations including Bach Inspiration, Liu Kotow International Management and Promotion, National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts (Weiwuying), MIT Saxophone Ensemble, MIT Animals, and WIND IMAGE. In Malaysia, she serves as producer of Virama Ensemble and Marketing Director for Melody Music Consultant, Penang. She has also worked at the National Theater and Concert Hall in Taipei and holds a Bachelor's degree in Violin Performance from Soochow University.

In the classical piano world, few events carry the same prestige and symbolic significance, among them being the Chopin International Piano Competition. Held every five years in Warsaw, Poland, it is widely regarded as the pinnacle of competitive achievement for pianists, often compared to the Olympic Games in both stature and meaning.

The 19th Chopin International Piano Competition held in October 2025 attracted 642 contestants worldwide. Preliminary rounds in April and May narrowed the field to around 160 candidates, followed by three rounds in October before culminating in a final of no more than ten pianists. This rigorous structure underscores its reputation as one of the most demanding platforms for pianists globally.

This edition carried particular significance for Malaysia, bringing both surprise and excitement to the nation's music community. As a piano educator, I followed the live-streamed competition with a mix of tension and anticipation, proud to see Malaysia represented at every stage by Vincent Ong, a 25-year-old pianist from Penang. His participation marked a historic moment for the country.

Vincent's achievement goes beyond a personal milestone. It reflects Malaysia's growing presence in the international piano scene. To mark this, a national initiative was launched with support from the Ministry of Human Resources, TalentCorp, the Penang State Government, and partners including the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Kuala Lumpur, ABRSM, Trinity College London, Kawai Malaysia, Music Bliss, Deciso Fine Violins and UCSI University.

Organized by Rondo Production, "Vincent Ong: A Homecoming" ran from 20th to 28th March 2026. The Kuala Lumpur segment, held at Recital Hall, UCSI University, featured masterclasses, dialogue sessions and concerts, offering audiences the opportunity to experience his artistry.

The event commenced on 20th March with a Masterclass & Dialogue Session at UCSI University. Three performers: Lee Zenn Hall, Ho Jia Jun, and Mary-Anne Yap Jia Min, took part, with two representing UCSI's Institute of Music. The dialogue session that followed brought together Vincent Ong, his former teacher Ng Chong Lim, Edward Ling (Group CEO, TalentCorp) and moderator Kenny Ooi (Founder & CEO of Rondo Production), focusing on building pathways for the next generation of Malaysian artists.



On 23th and 24th March, Ong presented two nights of concerts featuring works by Haydn, Chopin, Brahms, Bartók and Prokofiev. His performances showcased both technical mastery and emotional depth, leaving a lasting impression on audiences.

During this homecoming tour, I had the privilege of working closely with Vincent and his management team. I found myself operating in a largely unseen but essential space: part of the network connecting the artist, his management led by Ms. Deborah Kay, and the organising teams. What became clear is that an artist is supported by more than stage-ready talent. Vincent's dedication is evident in performance, but off stage it reveals a deeper attentiveness that extends to even the smallest details.

I also witnessed a disciplined process behind the scenes. Ms. Deborah Kay continuously filters and shapes information before it reaches Vincent, while his responses are carried back with equal care. These seemingly small details like how something is worded, when it is communicated and how much flexibility is assumed, can make a significant difference. Without clear communication, even well-intentioned requests can become overwhelming.

Beyond the concerts, one of the most meaningful aspects of the Homecoming Tour was found in the masterclasses and dialogues. These sessions revealed a different dimension of Vincent's artistry, not as a performer, but as a mentor shaping how the next generation encounters music. In these spaces, his approach was not to impose interpretation, but to guide students toward awareness. He would often ask them to listen more closely, to reconsider how they approached a phrase or to think about the intention behind each sound. The focus was not on correcting mistakes alone, but on cultivating a way of thinking, one that encourages curiosity, patience, and independence.

What stood out was how quickly the atmosphere shifted. Students who initially played with hesitation began to engage more openly. There was a visible sense of discovery, not only in technical improvement, but in how they related to the music itself. For many, this was perhaps their first encounter with a level of detail and attentiveness that goes beyond examination or performance preparation.

In this way, the masterclasses became more than educational sessions. They became points of transmission, where knowledge, experience and artistic values were passed on in real time. Vincent's role extended beyond that of a visiting artist; he became part of a larger process of nurturing and inspiring future musicians in Malaysia.

At the same time, this experience also highlights the importance of developing the structures that support such exchanges. As Malaysia continues to grow its presence in the international arts scene, there is an increasing need for not just talented performers, but professionals who understand how to sustain artistic work at a high level. Arts management and administration plays a crucial role in this development, ensuring that opportunities like these are not isolated events, but part of a continuing ecosystem.



Just as Vincent brings back knowledge, experience, and artistic perspective to the next generation, there is also a parallel hope: that the field of arts management in Malaysia will continue to evolve with the same level of intention and care. That it will grow not only in scale, but in depth, supporting artists in ways that allow them to fully realise their potential, both locally and internationally.

The Homecoming Tour, in this sense, is not only a celebration of an achievement. It is also a reminder of what is possible when artistry and structure grow together and of the role each plays in shaping the future of the arts in Malaysia.

Designing with Intelligence: The Rise of Artificial Intelligence in Architecture and the Built Environment—Shaping Future Design Paradigms in Malaysia and ASEAN



Ts. Chan Chiew Chuen
School of Architecture & Built Environment (SABE)

Serving as the Head of Faculty Internal Quality Assurance (FIQA) for SABE and a PhD candidate researching the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the future of architectural education. He recently received multiple awards, including Gold Award at the Research & Innovation Poster Competition (RIPC) 2025, the Gold Award at the International Conference on Technology Management, Business, and Entrepreneurship (ICTMBE) 2025, the Gold Award at the International Creative & Innovative Ideas Competition (ICIIC) 2025, as well as the UCSI SABE Best Lecturer (Teaching) Award in 2020. He is committed to advancing innovative possibilities within the architectural education, design pedagogy and construction industry in Malaysia, with the aim of contributing meaningfully to society and communities in alignment with SABE's vision and mission.



Assistant Professor Ts. Sr Dr. Nadzirah Hj. Zainordin
School of Architecture & Built Environment (SABE)

An active researcher, she has published over 150 papers, led or co-led more than 25 research grants, and received numerous local and international awards. She was recently named International Scholar Young Researcher and received the Outstanding Teaching Award. Listed in the British Publishing House's 3rd Edition of "The Most Successful People in Malaysia", she also won RISM's prestigious Young Surveyor of the Year award from Quantity Surveyor Professional Bodies. Inspirational Excellence Award from the Board of Quantity Surveyors Malaysia and Emerging Surveyor of the Year from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors RICS UK.

A New Era of Intelligent Design

The architecture and built environment sector across Malaysia and the ASEAN region is undergoing a profound transformation driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI). This shift reflects broader global trends in digitalisation, where AI is increasingly recognised as a catalyst for innovation, productivity and sustainability (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2023). In Malaysia, national initiatives such as *MyDIGITAL* and *Industry4WRD* highlight the strategic importance of digital transformation in strengthening the construction sector and enhancing economic competitiveness (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). Similarly, Singapore's Smart Nation initiative demonstrates how AI can be embedded within urban systems to improve efficiency, liveability and resilience (Smart Nation Singapore, 2022). These developments signal a clear transition towards intelligent, interconnected built environments across ASEAN.

AI in Architectural Practice: From Concept to Construction

AI is redefining architectural practice by shifting from intuition-driven processes to data-informed design. Technologies such as generative design and machine learning enable architects to explore multiple design alternatives and optimise performance outcomes (Burry, 2016; Eastman et al., 2018). Many industries have recognised their transformative potential. This includes healthcare, finance, transportation and the architectural, engineering and construction (AEC) sector, where it is seen as a powerful tool for addressing various complex challenges and boosting efficiency (Darko et al., 2020; Saka et al., 2023; Yu, 2025). Building Information Modelling (BIM), when integrated with AI, enhances project coordination, clash detection and lifecycle management. Research shows that AI-enabled BIM systems can significantly improve efficiency and reduce project risks (Sacks et al., 2020). In Malaysia, BIM adoption has been increasingly applied in infrastructure projects such as MRT developments, supporting better project delivery and cost control (CIDB Malaysia, 2020).

Smart and Sustainable Built Environments

AI plays a critical role in advancing sustainability within the built environment. AI-driven tools can optimise energy performance, reduce carbon emissions and support lifecycle assessment at early design stages (Lu et al., 2019). This aligns with global sustainability agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015).

In Singapore, AI is used in smart urban systems to manage traffic, monitor environmental conditions and improve energy efficiency (Batty, 2018). In Malaysia, smart city initiatives in Iskandar Malaysia demonstrate the potential of integrating digital technologies into urban development to enhance sustainability and resilience (Iskandar Regional Development Authority, 2022).

Policy and Governance: Navigating Opportunities and Risks

Despite its benefits, AI adoption raises important policy and governance challenges. Issues related to data privacy, cybersecurity and ethical decision-making must be carefully addressed (Floridi et al., 2018). Effective governance frameworks are essential to ensure responsible AI deployment while maintaining public trust.

In ASEAN, efforts are being made to develop digital policies that support innovation while safeguarding societal interests (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). However, the lack of standardisation in AI implementation within the construction sector remains a significant challenge. At the governance level, the need for ethical AI training and workforce readiness aligns with institutional and policy frameworks discussed in higher education literature (Chan, 2023 & Ifenthaler et al., 2024).

Workforce Readiness and Skills Transformation

The integration of AI into the built environment necessitates a transformation in workforce skills. Studies indicate a growing demand for digital competencies, including data analytics, computational design and interdisciplinary collaboration (World Economic Forum, 2020).

In Malaysia, the construction workforce faces a skills gap in adopting advanced technologies, highlighting the need for upskilling and reskilling initiatives (CIDB Malaysia, 2021). Institutional readiness studies highlight that digital transformation initiatives often outpace staff upskilling, creating a critical capability gap among educators (Ahmad & Wan, 2019; Mat Yusoff et al., 2025). For younger professionals, AI presents an opportunity to lead innovation and redefine professional roles within the industry.

Rethinking Architectural Education

Educational institutions must adapt to prepare future professionals for an AI-driven industry. Integrating AI into architectural curricula can enhance students' ability to engage with emerging technologies and complex design challenges (Oxman, 2017).

In Malaysia, universities have begun incorporating BIM and digital design tools into their programmes. However, further integration of AI, along with ethical and sustainability considerations, is needed to ensure holistic education (Abioye et al., 2021). AI supports flexible and individualised learning in design studios by tailoring feedback, enabling self-paced exploration of parametric models and simulations and assisting students with uneven technical backgrounds. (Mat Yusoff et al., 2025; Jelodar, 2025).

Industry Collaboration and Digital Ecosystems

Collaboration among industry stakeholders is critical for successful AI adoption. Professional bodies, government agencies, and private firms must work together to create a supportive digital ecosystem (KPMG, 2022). Initiatives by CIDB Malaysia to promote construction digitalisation are steps in the right direction. Expanding these efforts to include AI-focused strategies can further accelerate innovation within the sector.

Sustainability and Inclusivity in the Age of AI

AI has the potential to significantly enhance sustainability outcomes in the built environment. However, it is essential to ensure that these advancements are inclusive and accessible to all communities (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Equitable access to technology, particularly in developing regions, is crucial to avoid widening the digital divide. Sustainable development must remain human-centred, balancing technological innovation with social responsibility.

The Future of AI in the Built Environment

The future of the built environment lies in the integration of AI with emerging technologies such as digital twins, IoT and robotics (Boje et al., 2020). These technologies will enable more responsive, adaptive and resilient urban systems.

For Malaysia and ASEAN, embracing AI presents an opportunity to enhance regional competitiveness and address urbanisation challenges. Strategic alignment between policy, education and industry will be key to achieving this vision.

Artificial Intelligence is reshaping architecture and the built environment, offering transformative opportunities for innovation and sustainability. However, realising its full potential requires a collaborative and responsible approach involving policymakers, industry professionals and educators.

The shift brought by AI mandates that higher education institutions change and adapt their approach to cultivate future professionals capable of effectively utilising these powerful tools (Brozovsky et al., 2024; Komatina et al., 2024). Arguably, integrating AI in Malaysia's private higher education institutions (PHEIs) is crucial for developing various student skills for the 21st century.

For the younger generation, AI represents not only a tool but a platform for leadership and creativity. By embracing intelligent design, Malaysia and ASEAN can build a future that is not only technologically advanced but also inclusive, resilient and sustainable.

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Global Perspectives in Design Education: Exploring Chuzhou Museum & Art Museum



Mohd Sufian Bin Mohd Anwar
Head of Programme in 3D Animation Design
De Institute of Creative Arts and Design (ICAD)

Sufian is an award-winning design professional and Lecturer at the Institute of Creative Arts and Design (ICAD), UCSI University. Translating 11 years of high-level experience from Media Prima Berhad into his academic practice, he is a recognised expert in set and stage design, TV-broadcast augmented reality, industrial design, video production and photography. A celebrated visionary in broadcast media, his outstanding artistic direction secured two Best Set Design awards at Anugerah Skrin TV3 (2013, 2015) and a distinguished Best Set Design nomination at the Anugerah Seri Angkasa in 2016.



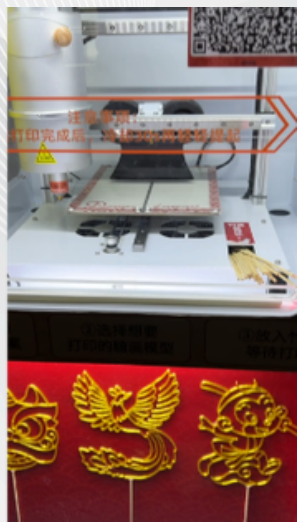
Chuzhou Polytechnic

I recently travelled to Chuzhou, China on December 20, 2025 for a highly rewarding teaching collaboration with Chuzhou Polytechnic. One of the absolute highlights of my trip was a half-day visit to the Chuzhou Museum and Art Museum to see a showcase of artworks produced by local university students.



3D printer results

The exhibition featured a fantastic variety of creative disciplines, ranging from 2D/3D Animation, graphic and IP design to industrial design. Given my background in digital visualisation and set design, I absolutely loved examining the 3D-printed industrial design product mock-ups. The quality and precision of the 3D printing were remarkable. The students even showcased specialised 3D printers that produced edible chocolate and sweet candies; a brilliant demonstration of creative technology in practice.



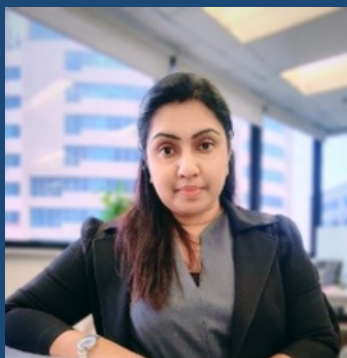
Candy 3D printer

My final verdict? This exhibition truly highlighted the immense capability of these emerging designers. Chuzhou may not be the most famous city, but the creative talent I saw was truly top-notch with an impressive dedication to high-quality detailing evident in most of the artworks. I am really glad I had the opportunity to experience this firsthand. Exploring how art and design students approach their craft in different parts of the world is always a deeply inspiring experience.



Students showcase their artworks

Bridging the Gap: Understanding Employer Attitudes Toward Autism in the Workforce



Ms. Nalayanni Vasu is a highly skilled Paediatrics Intensive Care Nurse with five years of specialised experience in delivering compassionate, patient-focused care. In addition, she brings 18 years of expertise as a Nurse Educator, during which she has guided and mentored thousands of registered nurses, advancing their professional growth and reinforcing best practices. Since becoming an HRDF-certified Trainer in 2014, Ms. Nalayanni has developed and conducted impactful training programs on cardiovascular health and paediatrics care, helping to elevate both patient outcomes and nursing proficiency. Deeply passionate about curriculum design and staff development, Ms. Nalayanni is dedicated to strengthening healthcare delivery through continuous education and training initiatives.

1. Introduction: The Current Landscape of ASD Employment

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a biological neuropsychiatric condition defined by persistent challenges in social communication and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities. While the neurodiversity movement has gained global momentum, the transition to adulthood for autistic individuals in Malaysia remains fraught with systemic barriers. Despite their immense potential, adults with ASD face significantly reduced opportunities in securing and maintaining meaningful employment compared to their neurotypical peers.

To dismantle these barriers, we must first understand the mindsets of the "gatekeepers" of the Malaysian economy. A pivotal study conducted in the Klang Valley surveyed 145 employers—recruited from high-level venues such as the Malaysian Employers Federation National Conference and seminars at Affin Hwang Capital—to analyse how knowledge, management level and industry type influence the acceptance of neurodivergent talent. The findings reveal a sobering reality: increasing awareness does not automatically lead to a neuro-inclusive culture, uncovering a "Knowledge Paradox" that challenges our traditional advocacy strategies.

2. The Knowledge Paradox: Why Awareness Isn't Always Acceptance

One of the most counterintuitive findings of the study was that higher knowledge of ASD does not equate to a greater willingness to hire. In fact, the researchers noted a strong negative correlation ($\rho = -0.690$) between an employer's quiz scores regarding ASD and their level of acceptance. While the statistical significance ($p > 0.05$) suggests these findings are preliminary and require further investigation, the narrative trend is clear: for many Malaysian employers, a clinical understanding of autism symptoms often translates into skepticism rather than inclusion.

Observed Reality in Study	Observed Reality in Study
Reduction of Bias: Awareness should dismantle negative preconceptions and foster empathy.	Sustained Skepticism: Knowledgeable employers remained doubtful regarding work quality and productivity.
Increased Hiring: Education should lead to a higher willingness to integrate ASD talent.	Reduced Acceptance: Higher knowledge scores were paradoxically associated with poorer levels of acceptance.
Proactive Accommodation: Understanding needs should lead to better resource planning.	Resource Fear: Knowledge fueled concerns over the high "burden" of training costs and environmental expenditures.

This paradox persists because knowledgeable employers often hyper-focus on the perceived "deficits" of the disorder. The study identified three primary drivers of this skepticism:

- **Productivity Concerns:** A fear that neurodivergent traits will negatively interfere with the speed and quality of deliverables.
- **Perceived Financial Expenditure:** The assumption that specialised training and workplace modifications represent a significant drain on organizational profits.
- **Resource Misallocation:** Viewing the support needs of ASD employees as an unnecessary "burden" on existing staff and management structures.

Moving beyond what employers know, we must examine where they sit within the corporate hierarchy to understand how these biases manifest.

3. Management Perspectives: Who is Most Likely to Say 'Yes'?

The study identified a small negative correlation ($\rho = -0.057$, $p > 0.05$) between an employer's level of management and their level of acceptance. While not statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, the trend suggests that as one ascends the corporate ladder, perceived barriers to inclusion often increase.

Management Level Perspective	Low-Level Management Attitudes	Top-Level Management Attitudes
Level of Acceptance	Generally more open to neurodivergent colleagues in immediate teams.	Generally lower; attitudes are often dictated by broad organisational metrics.
Primary Concerns	Day-to-day integration and departmental harmony.	Macro-level costs of environmental modifications and lengthy onboarding times.
Barriers to Hiring	Direct "performance pressure" from superiors to prioritise immediate output over inclusion.	Concerns regarding frequent absenteeism and the perceived "supervision burden" on other staff.

The "So What?" for Advocacy: This data highlights a critical disconnect. While lower-level managers may be personally willing to foster a neuro-inclusive environment, they are often stifled by the rigid productivity mandates set by the top. For true systemic change, we must move beyond basic awareness and implement Executive Leadership Training and policy-level reforms that valorise diverse minds as assets rather than liabilities.

As we address these hierarchical hurdles, it is equally important to debunk the myths surrounding specific industries and personal relationships.

4. Industry & Relationship Myths: Finding Neutral Ground

A common misconception is that autistic individuals should be "pigeonholed" into specific fields like IT or data entry. However, the Klang Valley study found **no significant association** ($p = 0.617$) between career fields and acceptance levels. This indicates that no industry is inherently "autism-friendly" or discriminatory; individuals with ASD can—and do—succeed in everything from the creative arts to complex statistics.

The study also produced a startling finding regarding the "Type of Contact." Surprisingly, professional familiarity does not guarantee a lack of bias:

- The Professional Warning: Even clinicians, educators and therapists who work with the ASD community can harbour "implicit negative biases." This serves as a vital call to self-reflection for future healthcare providers; professional expertise can sometimes mask a clinical lens that overlooks the individual's humanity.
- Family vs. Community Support: While many families are supportive, the study noted that some may "alienate or exclude" neurodivergent members due to reputational fear and the desire to avoid social stigma. Conversely, many autistic individuals report finding more authentic acceptance and understanding among close friends than within their own family units.

Learning insight success in the workforce is not determined by the industry type, but by the employer's willingness to provide the "right means of channeling interests." When we shift our focus from a "medical model" of impairment to a "social model" of empowerment, we begin to see the transformative value of neurodivergent talent.

Recognising the neutral ground of industry allows us to focus on the unique, high-impact strengths that ASD employees bring to the Malaysian workforce.

5. The Untapped Value: Strengths of the ASD Workforce

When we strip away the stigma, we find a workforce characterised by exceptional professional capabilities. By channeling the focused interests of autistic individuals into specific job roles, Malaysian companies can gain a significant competitive edge.

1. **Unwavering Loyalty:** Autistic employees often show deep commitment to an organisation, significantly reducing the high costs of turnover.
2. **Exceptional Dependability:** They frequently demonstrate a high degree of consistency in attendance and adherence to daily work routines.
3. **Process Meticulousness:** A natural inclination toward specific interests allows for a rigorous approach to work processes, ensuring that every step of a task is followed with integrity.
4. **High-Output Attention to Detail:** The ability to focus intensely on "restricted" interests results in a level of accuracy and precision in final deliverables that neurotypical employees might overlook.

6. Conclusion: The Path to Inclusive Workplaces

The findings from the Klang Valley study underscore that the chief barrier to employment is not the disorder itself, but the attitudes of those who control the workplace. Occupational Therapists (OTs) and healthcare providers must recognise that they are the vanguards of a workplace revolution. Our role extends far beyond the clinic; we are essential advocates tasked with defending the right to employment and ensuring that neurodivergent adults are not just "hired," but truly integrated.

To boost employment rates in Malaysia, we must move toward eradicating stigma through evidence-based advocacy. The key is not more "awareness," but the active dismantling of workplace alienation and the creation of systems that support the unique talents of every individual. By challenging the biases of the gatekeepers and providing the right channels for diverse interests, we can ensure that the Malaysian workforce finally reflects the brilliance of all its citizens.

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