Students' Perception of Implementation of Compulsory Community Engagement via Service Learning in a Malaysian University

Lihanna Borhan, Amelia Wong Azman, Gairuzazmi Mat Ghani

International Islamic University Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Service learning is being implemented at the higher education level as part of the academic programme. Malaysia has made this a nationwide initiative with public universities expected to integrate service learning in some of their programs. The International Islamic University Malaysia has extended this to make community engagement via service learning a compulsory course for undergraduates. This study looks at students' perception for having to undergo this compulsory course.

Keywords – community engagement, service learning, higher education

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education introduced the initiative of Service Learning Malaysia (SuLaM) for all public higher education institutions. Universities were tasked with integrating service learning into their programmes. At International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), encouraging students to volunteer their service to the community has always been an important agenda. Prior to the SuLaM initiative, students have been given the opportunities to participate in service learning via non-credited platforms or credited courses as community service. Recently, in line with the adoption of its Sejahtera Academic Framework (SAF), IIUM has expanded it to community engagement and making this a compulsory credited course for undergraduate students (Azman et. al., 2023). The inclusion is made possible with the redesigning of the IIUM compulsory credited courses that inserted the Education for Sustainable Development aspect (ESD) into the courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service learning is defined as "a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). In service-learning, the community service activities are linked to academic content, and the documentation and reflection regarding the activities turn this from mere community service into a potentially impactful pedagogical approach.

Since then, many studies have been conducted to ascertain the impact of service learning at different levels of education. While the focus is on student learning as the focus of service learning is on the pedagogical approach, these studies also included other aspects of student development.

Service learning has been found to help students achieve the learning outcomes better than without the service learning component (Kearney, 2013; Lovat & Clement, 2016). Perhaps more importantly, service learning has impacted students in ways beyond just the academics. Students realised that there was a need in the community and that there was more imperative for them to continue with community service (Bentley & Ellison, 2005; Long et. al., 2011). There is also better appreciation of diversity (Gil-Gomez et. al., 2015) and higher cultural competency (Chen et. al., 2012) for students who underwent service learning.

A meta-analysis using 62 studies that reported the impact of service learning on students found that in addition to improved academic performance, significant gains were also recorded in attitudes towards self, attitudes towards school and learning, civic engagement and social skills (Celio et. al., 2011). Other more recent reviews focusing on higher education continue to find that service learning brings about positive outcomes for students such as better attitudes and empathy (Case at. al., 2020), enhanced soft skills (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023), leadership and teamwork skills (Marcilla-Toribio et. al., 2022), personal and professional growth (Mutambara, 2023), and advocating for social justice (Compare & Albanesi, 2022).

How does community engagement (CE) fit with service learning? Table 1 indicates the structured level of involvement of community engagement for IIUM. It is important to note that the term 'community engagement' is used to reflect all categories (i.e. community services, community engagement and community transformation) unless otherwise stated. The different levels based on the three (3) categories aim to provide descriptions of interactions for future community engagement projects since the ideal community engagement is continuity and growth.

In the spirit of humanising education as laid in the IIUM SAF, it is hoped that transformative learning platform through community engagement would benefit both the volunteers and the target participating communities. Community engagement empowers the community members through building a relationship based on trust between the different parties working with the community. It focuses on collaboration, not just technical expertise, for an effective and sustainable solution of the needs of the communities – and these needs are the ones identified together with the community members (UNICEF SBC Guidance, n.d.). Ultimately, the goal is for the community involved to transform and sustain itself.

Table 1: Descriptions of engagement level with community

Category	Level	Definition
Community Services	Level 1	Build network e.g. communication/ discussion with community and study on the need of the society.
	Level 2	Support and involvement e.g. organising a programme with a specific community.
	Level 3	Change in knowledge, attitude, skills and aspiration e.g. increasing knowledge, attitude, skills and community aspiration among the community/ participants.
Community Engagement	Level 4	Change in practice e.g. involve collaboration with the community/ participants through mutual decisions recognising the

		community/ participants' need.
Community Transformation	Level 5	Empowerment i.e. Community/ participants able to operate independently

Background Of The Study

Convinced of the potential benefits of service learning, coupled with the university's vision to be a "centre of excellence in educational research and innovation […] for the betterment of human life and civilisation" (Borhan et. al., 2022, p. vi), from 2020 all undergraduate students would undergo community engagement. It is felt that it was necessary was students to undergo CE during their undergraduate years, and the courses were crafted as such to "bridge the chasm between academia and community" (Sanusi, p, 5). Students were encouraged to take the course in as early as possible, hence the majority taking the course were first year and second year students.

In the context of IIUM community engagement, students are encouraged to explore different types of engagement such as:

i. Community-based research
ii. Community transformation activities
iii. Service learning and internship
iv. Knowledge exchange
v. Application and industry engagement

Over the course of two (2) semesters, students would first do community profiling and plan their project with the community members (CE 1). The implementation of the project is done in the following semester (CE 2). At the end of every semester, in addition to the executive report, the students present their project in a symposium that is open to the public. The presentation consists of oral presentation in front of a jury who will rate their project as gold, silver or bronze, and a poster presentation for interested members of the public.

Students taking this course are divided into sections, with each section having between 20-25 members. Each section is led by at least one instructor. The instructors for the course come from across the university, and may be academic or administrators. They did this voluntarily, no additional honorarium and no reduction of teaching or work load was given. The course is coordinated at the central level. Students choose their own sections based on their preference of timing, instructor or project theme.

The fact that community engagement via service-learning is a compulsory credited course makes this a unique implementation in Malaysian public universities. The fact that the instructors were also volunteers from across the faculties was also another unique aspect of this course. Yet it also gave rise to concerns of quality assurance with regard to its implementation. As such, it presents a rare opportunity to study students' perception of undergoing compulsory community engagement as a credited part of their academic program.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted during the symposium event of Semester 2 academic year 2022/2023. This was an independent survey conducted by the authors without interference by the agency in charge of running the course. Notices inviting students to answer the survey with the QR-code were posted around the venue of the symposium. The anonymity was assured. A total of 1500 students answered, of which 685 were taking CE1

and 815 students were taking CE2. The total students registered in both CE1 and CE2 were 2394, meaning almost 63% chose to answer the survey.

The survey consisted of 10 items regarding the conduct of the course and the impact of the course on the students. The students rated their degree of agreement to the statements on a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). Given the different thrusts of the courses, some of the items in CE1 were different from CE2. The identical items revolved on the administrative aspects of the course.

Additionally, during the symposium, some students and instructors were randomly interviewed on their perception of the course, especially on what they felt they have gained from the course. This was done by going around the symposium venue and randomly stopping at project booths. Besides the two (2) mentioned internal stakeholders, testimonies given by external stakeholders who attended the symposium as juries were also gathered from their short speech given at the end of the symposium. Feedback from external stakeholders' social media public postings were also gathered to validate the findings.

RESULTS

The responses from the survey were tabulated to produce the average rating for each item. The higher the rating, the more students generally agree with the statement.

Table 2 Student Rating of Items in CE1

Items	Rating
1. The instructors are concerned with students' attendance in the class.	8.3
2. The contents of the course guide students in planning and designing community engagement activities.	8.4
3. The online teaching materials used in the course are related to the importance of community engagement.	8.2
4. Students are able to exchange ideas with each other when planning community engagement.	8.5
5. The assignments in the course are explained to the students.	8.2
6. The assignments help me understand community engagement better.	8.4
7. The course is theoretical rather than practical in nature.	6.9
8. I am excited to implement the plan in Part 2.	8.2
9. The instructors in this course are people who care about others' well-being.	8.6
10. This course has opened my eyes to other community's hardship(s).	8.6

Table 2 presents the rating of students who were taking the first part of the course. There is an overall positive perception of this course. The responses also indicate at least in terms of the conduct of the course at this stage, the students felt that their voices are being heard and the awareness of community engagement was there. The only worrying aspect is the finding that the students felt this course was more theoretical instead of practical. However, this should still not be surprising given that CE1 was more on understanding community engagement and planning, the students only spent 1 or 2 sessions with the community during this part of the course. The rest of the sessions were spent on-campus processing the input from the community and planning for the activities to be implemented in CE2. Although these are hands-on activities, perhaps from a first-year

student's perspective, it is still theoretical because the action is happening in the classroom and not in the community.

Table 3 Student Rating of Items in CE2

Items	Rating
1. The instructors are concerned with students' attendance in the class.	8.3
2. The course provides opportunities for students to participate in meaningful community development projects.	8.5
3. The activities in this course make students appreciate the importance of community engagement.	8.3
4. I have gained confidence to lead a community from taking this course.	7.9
5. Taking this course has inspired me to lead community development projects.	7.9
6. The proposal designed in Part 1 is implemented in this course.	8.3
7. The course is theoretical rather than practical in nature.	6.5
8. The assignments in the course are explained to the students.	8.0
9. The instructor has experience in community engagement activities.	8.1
10. The participating community gives feedback to the students.	8.2

Table 3 presents the rating of students who were taking the second part of the course. Again, there is an overall positive perception of this course. In general, the course has been successful in making students appreciate the need for community engagement.

Although the rating may not be extremely high, the majority of the students did feel that they have gained some confidence in leading a community and that they have been inspired to lead projects for community development.

From the interviews during the symposium, students revealed that they have enjoyed taking the course. Initially resistant to the idea of having to take something "irrelevant" to their academic programme, they were pleasantly surprised to undergo this experiential learning process. Initially, they were also anxious to go out into a community and approach the community members. They also reported satisfaction in being able to overcome their initial reservations in approaching a community and talking with its members. They overwhelmingly agreed this was a different course one would normally expect to be offered in a university. For many students from the more privileged background, this course was their first time out into the underprivileged community and served as an eye-opener on what struggling to survive may be about. Those who have completed CE2 also shared feeling good that they were doing something that benefitted society.

One of the juries (J1) stated that, "..what I sense the biggest achievement is the passion from the student. I think they will appreciate what they are doing now when they are already in the market, when they are working". Another jury (J2) shared with the audience that what he felt as the greatest achievement of the initiatives is the presented projects which are impactful including the visit to the indigenous people who seemed to be marginalised. Another stakeholder (J3) claimed that in his view, IIUM Usrah in Action course as

the best humanitarian subject in the work in his posting on June 7th 2024. In the same posting, he commented that the course is good awareness exposing students to volunteerism while becoming a bridge between all main stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

In general, the findings suggest that compulsory community engagement via service-learning is not necessarily a burden to the students. Although the logistics may be daunting (see Zulkifle, 2023 for details), the students generally benefitted from taking this course. Hence, it could be surmised that the objectives of course to inspire students to lead community development projects and to make students appreciate the importance of community engagement have been achieved.

Although the leadership aspects may not seem to be strikingly obvious, given that these were mostly first year and second year students, their willingness to consider leading a community development project is already a positive aspect in their personal development. It is expected that as they move along in their studies, and get more involved in other community engagement projects that are available via other platforms in the university, their leadership skills will be honed.

One unexpected finding was many of the students generally feeling that the course is still more theoretical than practical in nature, despite the design of the course to be otherwise. This may be due to confusion on students' part on what constitutes "theoretical" and what constitutes "practical" or it may actually be due to some instructors making their sections more theoretical than practical. This is something that should be investigated further.

Further research needs to be done to assess other impacts this course may have. These should also include looking from the perspective of community members. A more in-depth study to look at the course from the instructors' perspective should also be done.

Community engagement via service-learning should be transformative. And this transformation should not be confined to the community alone, but it should also transform the students and the instructors involved in this journey. Over time, as more students undergo this, and more staff members are involved as instructors, the objective of nurturing graduates to become agents of positive change to the community would be realized. Studies such as this would help not just IIUM improve the implementation of compulsory community engagement courses, but could also provide insights to other educational institutions embarking in similar endeavors.

REFERENCES

1. Azman, A. W., Borhan, L., & Ghani, G. M. (2023). Usrah in Action: From vision to policy in creating a platform for ACTS. In Zulkifle, W. Z. W. (Ed.), Agents of Change Towards Sustainability: Journey of Making a Difference from Whole Person to Whole Society Transformation. Sejahtera Centre for Sustainability and Humanity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. p. 10-17.
2. Kearney, K. R. (2013). Impact of a Service-Learning Course on First-Year Pharmacy Students' Learning Outcomes. American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 77 (2) Article 34.
3. Lovat, T. & Clement, N. (2016). Service Learning as Holistic Values Pedagogy. Journal of Experiential Education, 39(2), 115–129.
4. Bentley, R., & Ellison, K. J. (2005). Impact of a Service-Learning Project on Nursing Students. Nursing Education Perspectives; 26, (5), 287-290.
5. Long, J. A., Lee, R. S., Federico, S., Battaglia, C., Wong, S., & Earnest, M. (2011). Developing Leadership and Advocacy Skills in Medical Students Through Service Learning. Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, 17 (4), 369-372.
6. Gil-Gomez, J., Chiva-Bartoll, O., & Marti-Puig, M. (2015). The impact of service learning on the training of pre-service teachers: Analysis from a physical education subject. European Physical Education Review, 21(4), 467–484.

7. Chen, H., McAdams-Jones, D., Tay, D. L., & Packer, J. M. (2012) The impact of service–learning on students' cultural competence. Teaching and Learning in Nursing, 7, 67-73.

8. Celio, C. I., Durlak, J., & Dymnicki, A. (2011). A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Service-Learning on Students. Journal of Experiential Education, 34 (2).

9. Case, L., Schram, B., Jung, J., Leung, W., & Yun, J. (2020). A meta-analysis of the effect of adapted physical activity service-learning programs on college student attitudes toward people with disabilities. Disability and Rehabilitation. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2020.1727575

10. Culcasi, I. & Venegas, R. P. F. (2023). Service-learning and soft skills in higher education: A systematic literature review. Form@re, 23(2), 24-43.

11. Marcilla-Toribio I, Moratalla-Cebrián ML, Bartolomé-Guitierrez R, Cebada-Sánchez S, Galán-Moya EM, Martínez-Andrés M. Impact of Service-Learning educational interventions on nursing students: An integrative review. Nurse Educ Today. 2022 Sep;116:105417. doi: 10.1016/j.nedt.2022.105417. Epub 2022 May 27. PMID: 35691112.

12. Mutambara, Tsitsi. (2023). Service learning in teacher education programmes: A literature review on the rationale, benefits, and challenges. International Journal of Higher Education Management. 9 (2). 63-75.

13. Compare, C., & Albanesi, C. (2023). Belief, attitude and critical understanding. A systematic review of social justice in Service-Learning experiences. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 33(2), 332–355. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2639

14. UNICEF SBC Guidance (n.d.). Community Engagement. https://www.sbcguidance.org/understand/community-engagement#:~:text=A%20way%20of%20working%20with,issues%20that%20affect%20their%20lives.

15. Borhan, L., Azman, A. W., Ghani, G. M., Abdullah, M. F., Abd-Rahman, Z., & and Muhammed-Yusof, Z, eds. (2021). Sejahtera Academic Framework : Humanising Education For Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin Post-COVID-19 Disruptions. Office of Knowledge for Change and Advancement (KCA), IIUM.

16. Sanusi. Z. A. (2023). Anecdotes along the journey of making a difference through Usrah in Action. In Zulkifle, W. Z. W. (Ed.), Agents of Change Towards Sustainability: Journey of Making a Difference from Whole Person to Whole Society Transformation. Sejahtera Centre for Sustainability and Humanity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. p. 2-9.

17. Zulkifle, W. Z. W. (Ed.), (2023). Agents of Change Towards Sustainability: Journey of Making a Difference from Whole Person to Whole Society Transformation. Sejahtera Centre for Sustainability and Humanity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.