

Preparing Basic Requirements for Kids with Disabilities to Enter Primary School

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ABSTRACT

The SULAM (Service-Learning Malaysia-University for Society) program is an initiative that bridges the gap between academic learning and community engagement. Through SULAM, students apply their academic knowledge in real-world contexts while contributing positively to the community. This initiative cultivates civic responsibility, enhances personal growth, and deepens students' understanding of societal challenges. As part of this initiative, SULAM students visited *Pusat Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti* (PPDK) Seri Utama, a rehabilitation center in the community, dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities by offering therapeutic, educational, and skill-building programs. The center provides a nurturing environment for children and young adults with special needs, focusing on inclusivity, independence, and quality of life. One of the key insights gained during the visit was the importance of supporting children with disabilities in meeting basic school entry requirements. Many of these children require additional support in areas such as communication, motor skills, social interaction, and self-care routines before they are ready for mainstream education. PPDK Seri Utama plays a crucial role in equipping them with these foundational skills through structured therapy and personalized guidance. By observing daily routines and engaging with both staff and children, SULAM students recognized the challenges faced by the center in ensuring that every child is adequately prepared for this transition. Through SULAM, the students experienced connecting the theoretical aspects of Social Entrepreneurship with the practical realities of supporting children with special needs. In doing so, the students not only gained valuable insights into inclusive education but also understood how collaborative efforts between universities and community centers can enhance the readiness of children with disabilities to enter primary school successfully.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Disability Inclusion, Primary School Readiness, Rehabilitation Center, SULAM.

INTRODUCTION

The SULAM (Service-Learning Malaysia-University for Society) program is a transformative initiative introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia to bridge the gap between academic learning and community engagement. Rooted in the principles of experiential education, SULAM integrates structured service activities with academic coursework, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts while simultaneously addressing community needs (Hanum et al. 2021). This pedagogical approach is not merely an extension of volunteerism or community service; it is a deliberate and reflective educational strategy that fosters civic responsibility, critical thinking, and personal growth. SULAM was conceptualized as part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) under Shift 1, which emphasizes the development of holistic,

entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates (Adam and Mohamed 2024). The program is designed to instill values such as love, happiness, and mutual respect, while promoting inclusivity and social justice. Unlike traditional community service, which often lacks a structured learning agenda, SULAM ensures that service activities are embedded within academic courses, with clearly defined learning outcomes and reflective components (Mohamad et al. 2024).

At its core, SULAM is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience. Students engage in structured service activities that meet identified community needs, reflect on their experiences, and connect these reflections to academic content (Nghah et al. 2023). This process enhances their understanding of course material, broadens their appreciation of societal issues, and cultivates a deeper sense of civic engagement. SULAM employs various approaches, including direct face-to-face service projects such as tutoring or conducting workshops, indirect projects addressing broader issues like environmental conservation, advocacy by educating the public on topics of interest and research-based by gathering and presenting data to support community initiatives. These approaches ensure that students are not passive participants but active contributors to societal development. The integration of service with learning transforms both the educational experience and the community impact, creating a symbiotic relationship between universities and society. Through SULAM, students are given the opportunity to apply their academic knowledge in real-world settings, while also contributing positively to the community. This program aims to foster a sense of civic responsibility, enabling students to gain practical experience and a deeper understanding of societal challenges (Samsudin et al. 2024). By participating in SULAM, students not only enhance their personal growth but also make meaningful contributions to social well-being.

The visit to PPDK Seri Utama was an integral part of this initiative. PPDK Seri Utama is a rehabilitation center that focuses on empowering individuals with disabilities by providing therapeutic, educational, and skill-building programs. Established to create a supportive environment for those with special needs, the center offers a range of services aimed at improving the quality of life and promoting independence among its members. The center serves individuals of various ages, from children to young adults, and is dedicated to fostering inclusivity and self-sufficiency. The purpose of their visit was to gain first-hand insight into the operations of PPDK Seri Utama and to understand the challenges faced by the center in providing care and support for individuals with disabilities. By observing the daily routines and engaging with both the staff and the individuals at the center, they aimed to identify areas where external support could be beneficial. This visit allowed them to connect the theoretical aspects of their studies in Social Entrepreneurship with the practical needs of the community, fostering a greater appreciation for inclusivity, social responsibility, and the importance of community service.

METHODOLOGY

As part of the SULAM course in Social Entrepreneurship (Žur and Naumann 2018), a field visit is conducted to PPDK Seri Utama, a community-based rehabilitation center dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities. This visit was not only an academic exercise but a profound learning experience that allowed them to witness the intersection of theory and practice. PPDK Seri Utama operates under the framework of Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR), a model endorsed by the World Health Organization and implemented in Malaysia since 1984. The center provides therapeutic, therapy (Spain et al. 2017, Wang et al. 2021), educational, and skill-building programs tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities, ranging from children to young adults, including autism (Lord et al. 2018, Lord et al. 2020, Frith and Happé 2005, Hirota and King 2023), cerebral palsy (Kriger 2006, Vitrikas et al. 2020, Miller 2005), and down syndrome (Antonarakis et al. 2020, Bull 2020). Its mission is to foster independence, inclusivity, and self-sufficiency among its members. During their visit, they engaged with the staff, volunteers, and participants at the center. They observed daily routines, participated in activities, and conducted informal interviews to understand the challenges faced by the center. These interactions revealed the dedication of the caregivers, the resilience of the participants, and the pressing need for external support in terms of resources, training, and community awareness.

The visit to PPDK Seri Utama (Fig. 1) served as a practical extension of their coursework in Social Entrepreneurship, which emphasizes the creation of innovative solutions to social problems (Lillo 2019). By applying concepts such as stakeholder analysis, value proposition, and impact measurement, they were able to assess the operational model of the center and identify areas for improvement. For instance, they noted that the center offers a variety of skill-building modules such as sewing, cooking, and agriculture. There is potential to

enhance these programs through partnerships with local businesses and NGOs. Such collaborations could provide funding, mentorship, and market access, thereby increasing the sustainability and impact of the center's initiatives. Moreover, the experience underscored the importance of inclusive design and accessibility in community projects. Many of the facilities at PPDK Seri Utama could benefit from ergonomic improvements and adaptive technologies to better serve individuals with physical and cognitive impairments. These insights are invaluable for students aspiring to become social entrepreneurs, as they highlight the need for empathy, innovation, and collaboration in addressing complex societal issues (Usman et al. 2022). A key component of SULAM is critical reflection, which enables students to internalize their experiences and derive meaningful insights. Through guided reflection sessions, they discussed the emotional responses, ethical dilemmas, and learning outcomes from the visit. These discussions fostered a deeper understanding of disability rights, social inclusion, and the role of education in community development. Many students expressed a newfound appreciation for the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and the importance of advocacy and policy reform. Others highlighted the transformative power of empathy and the need to move beyond charity towards empowerment. These reflections not only enriched their academic journey but also shaped their personal values and career aspirations. While the SULAM program offers numerous benefits, its implementation is not without challenges. Studies have identified issues such as limited structural support, gaps between theory and practice, and difficulties in building rapport with community partners.



Fig. 1 SULAM students from UTeM visit PPDK Seri Utama

Based on an interview with the teachers at PPDK Seri Utama, several challenges were identified that affect the center's ability to deliver quality support to individuals with disabilities. These challenges include limited resources and funding, a high teacher-to-student ratio, lack of community awareness and support. PPDK Seri Utama operates with tight financial constraints, making it difficult to maintain and improve its services. The lack of adequate funding affects several areas: outdated therapy equipment, insufficient teaching materials, and the inability to hire additional staff. Without modern and specialized tools, it becomes challenging to provide effective therapy sessions or accommodate the diverse needs of students (Brondino et al. 2015, Lang et al. 2012). Furthermore, financial constraints limit opportunities to organize programs or expand their services to reach more families in need. The center struggles with a lack of manpower, resulting in a high teacher-to-student ratio. Each student has unique requirements that often demand individualized attention, but the limited number of

teachers makes this difficult to achieve. Teachers must balance managing group activities and attending to students with more complex needs, leading to burnout and reduced effectiveness.

This challenge directly impacts the quality of care and attention provided to each student, particularly for those with severe physical or intellectual disabilities. Teachers do their best to provide equitable support, but the imbalance between staff and students makes it a persistent issue. A major obstacle for PPDK Seri Utama is the lack of awareness within the local community about its mission and the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Misconceptions and stigma around disabilities discourage some families from seeking help or engaging with the center, which affects enrollment and outreach. Additionally, inconsistent community support means the center often struggles to gather volunteers or secure steady contributions. If the community had a better understanding of the center's work and its positive impact on individuals with disabilities, it could lead to increased involvement and support. For instance, regular partnerships with local businesses, NGOs, or educational institutions could help alleviate some of the operational burdens faced by the center.

In order to improve the quality of services for the preparation of the kids, a few suggestions are recommended, such as improving facilities and resources, expanding training programs for staff and caregivers, and strengthening community engagement. To enhance the support provided at PPDK Seri Utama, upgrading the facilities and resources is highly recommended. For instance, adding more adaptive equipment, such as sensory integration tools (Fig. 2), physical therapy equipment (Fig. 3), and accessible technology can significantly benefit individuals with disabilities. Creating a dedicated sensory room for massage (Fig. 4) or upgrading the existing spaces with soothing colors and tactile materials can further create a calming environment, which is essential for participants' development and comfort. Offering continuous training and development programs for the staff and caregivers at PPDK Seri Utama is crucial.



Fig. 2 Education equipment



Fig. 3 Therapy equipment

These programs can include workshops on handling specific disabilities, psychological first aid, and communication strategies to ensure that they are equipped with up-to-date skills and knowledge. Additionally, involving caregivers in these training sessions can empower them to extend the support provided at the center into their daily lives, fostering consistent progress for the participants. To ensure the success and sustainability of PPDK Seri Utama, fostering stronger community engagement is vital. Organizing community awareness campaigns, open days, or fundraising events can help generate support and create a sense of inclusion for the center. Collaborating with local schools, universities, and organizations to encourage volunteering opportunities will also provide additional manpower and innovative ideas to enrich the programs offered at PPDK. Building these connections will enhance awareness and encourage long-term community involvement in supporting individuals with disabilities. This issue is compounded by inconsistent or one-time donations from external parties, making it difficult to plan long-term improvements. Teachers and staff often resort to innovative methods to make the most of the limited resources available, but this is not a sustainable solution.



Fig. 4 Sensory massage by the teacher

The evaluation of the program's effectiveness is conducted by sharing a video of the activities on YouTube. This approach allows for transparent and accessible documentation of the program outcomes while reaching a broader audience. Key components of the evaluation methodology include video documentation, audience engagement metrics, feedback collection, and participant reflections. The video captures the various activities, interactions, and outcomes of the program, showcasing participants' involvement and the impact on the PPDK community. This visual representation highlights the alignment of the program with its objectives. Metrics such as views, likes, comments, and shares on YouTube are analyzed to assess the reach and reception of the program. Positive engagement indicates community interest and validates the relevance of the initiative. Comments and feedback from viewers are reviewed to gain insights into the program's perceived effectiveness and areas for improvement. This qualitative data helps refine future activities and strategies. Participant testimonials shared within the video or as supplementary content help evaluate how the program influenced their skills, awareness, and understanding of social entrepreneurship (Sen et al. 2006).

At the end of the project, they come out with children's profiles with scores on trainee readiness to enter primary school.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents yearly data (2020–2024) and profiles produced by SULAM students on children aged 7 with different types of disabilities, and their performance in three developmental domains: toilet training, psychomotor skills, and verbal skills. The scoring system appears to range from lower scores (1–2), indicating weaker performance, to higher scores (3–4) reflecting better development, and score 5 is the highest. The number of

children varies each year (from 2 to 5 children), which may influence variability in results. Most children are categorized under learning disabilities, with occasional physical disabilities. Over all years, toilet training skills tend to show the highest scores, followed by psychomotor, and then verbal skills (which are often the weakest).

For toilet training development, in 2020, all children scored 2, indicating moderate ability. From 2021 onwards, improvement is observed, with many children achieving scores of 3 and 4. 2022 and 2023 show particularly strong results (most children scoring 3 to 4). In 2024, performance remains good but slightly declines compared to 2022–2023 (split between scores 2 and 4). Toilet training skills appear to develop more consistently and successfully among children with both learning and physical disabilities. This may be because such skills are routine-based and reinforced daily in structured environments.

For psychomotor skills, more variation and moderate performance compared to toilet training. In 2020, all children scored 3, indicating good ability. In 2021, mixed results: 1 child scored 3, while 4 children scored 2. In 2022, improvement shows (all children scored 3). 2023 and 2024 show variability again, with some children dropping to a score of 2. Psychomotor development fluctuates over the years. This could be influenced by the type of disability (physical disabilities may limit motor development), and differences in intervention intensity or therapy access. Overall, the results suggest moderate progress but inconsistency.

Verbal skills development is the weakest domain overall. In 2020, all children scored 3 (relatively good baseline). In 2021, performance declines: children are distributed across scores 3, 2, and 1. 2022 shows mixed outcomes (scores 4, 2, 1). In 2023, there is an improvement (scores 4 and 3 dominate). In 2024, mixed again but slightly improved compared to 2021.

Table 1: Data of children with disabilities and readiness score to enter primary school

No.	Year	Child	Age	Disability	Toilet Train	Psychomotor	Verbal
1.	2020	2 males	7	Learning 2	Score 4 = 2 children	Score 3 = 2 children	Score 3 = 2 children
2.	2021	4 males, 1 female	7	Physical 1 Learning 4	Score 4 = 2 children Score 3 = 3 children	Score 3 = 1 child Score 2 = 4 children	Score 3 = 2 children Score 2 = 2 children Score 1 = 1 child
3.	2022	1 male, 2 females	7	Learning 3	Score 4 = 3 children	Score 3 = 3 children	Score 4 = 2 children Score 2 = 1 children
4.	2023	2 males, 3 females	7	Physical 1 Learning 4	Score 4 = 3 children Score 3 = 2 children	Score 3 = 2 children Score 2 = 3 children	Score 4 = 1 children Score 3 = 4 children
5.	2024	2 males, 2 females	7	Learning 4	Score 4 = 2 children Score 3 = 2 children	Score 3 = 1 child Score 2 = 3 children	Score 4 = 1 children Score 3 = 3 children

Verbal skills show the greatest variability and challenges, especially among children with learning disabilities. Language development often requires specialized intervention and consistent communication practice. The fluctuating results suggest that progress is less stable and more individualized.

A few reflections from the SULAM students are also observed from the SULAM activities. Students were inspired to explore how entrepreneurial approaches could be used to develop sustainable and impactful solutions for marginalized communities. This focus on innovation encouraged participants to think beyond traditional methods and consider purpose-driven strategies that address societal challenges effectively. The activity emphasized the significance of connecting with individuals within the PPDK community to understand their needs. Engaging with caregivers and students enhanced students' ability to build meaningful relationships and implement initiatives aligned with social entrepreneurship principles. Students gained a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and the importance of creating inclusive environments. This experience underscored the role of social enterprises in fostering positive change and addressing the needs of underserved groups. The program reinforced the importance of contributing to societal well-being. Students learned the value of dedicating efforts toward initiatives that promote inclusivity, empowerment, and long-term community improvement. Through hands-on participation, students developed their leadership and decision-making skills. Taking the lead in planning and executing activities allowed them to gain confidence and competence in driving social impact initiatives effectively.

CONCLUSION

The visit to PPDK Seri Utama was a deeply eye-opening experience that highlighted the dedication of the staff and the resilience of individuals with disabilities. It was clear that the center plays a crucial role in enhancing the lives of its members through tailored support and a holistic approach to rehabilitation. The staff's unwavering commitment and the members' determination to overcome their challenges left a lasting impression, showcasing the importance of community-based services in promoting independence and personal growth. Personally, this experience reinforced the significance of empathy, inclusiveness, and community support in creating a society that values and nurtures the potential of every individual. Witnessing the resilience of the members and the dedication of the staff deepened their understanding of the profound impact such centers have on individuals with disabilities. It also strengthened their commitment to promoting inclusivity and helping create a more compassionate society where everyone's potential is recognized and supported. Importantly, the program also emphasized the need to prepare basic requirements for children with disabilities to enter primary school, such as improving communication skills, motor coordination, and social adaptability. Learning disabilities dominate the dataset and are associated with stronger toilet training outcomes, moderate psychomotor progress, and weaker verbal development. Physical disabilities do not appear to strongly affect toilet training scores. Learning disabilities mainly impact cognitive and communication skills (verbal). Physical disabilities directly affect motor (psychomotor) development. The results indicate that children with disabilities can achieve significant progress, particularly in functional and routine-based skills such as toilet training. However, higher-level developmental skills such as verbal communication require more targeted, sustained intervention. There is also clear evidence that individual differences and the type of disability significantly influence developmental outcomes, suggesting the importance of personalized education and therapy programs. The contribution of children's profiles produced by SULAM students over five consecutive years has facilitated the PPDK Seri Utama to focus on training and preparing the children to enter primary schools. Additionally, the profiles are also useful for primary school teachers to prepare for continuous training for the children.

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