

Drivers Influencing LG120 Students' Leadership through Community Engagement Activities

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ABSTRACT

Community engagement does not only assist in developing the community but also fosters the students' growth. In integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the course Community Engagement for Professional Development (ELS303) focuses on collaborative competency which is believed to consequently cultivate multiple soft skills including leadership. Following Shared Leadership Theory, students may be accountable for different responsibilities and roles that are not necessarily a leader but they take ownership and honour these responsibilities. Although community engagement has been studied for decades, investigations on the students' leadership skills remain lacking. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the drivers influencing language students' leadership through community engagement activities. In achieving this, data will be collected quantitatively and qualitatively through questionnaire distributed to 80 final year language students who are taking ELS303 course and qualitatively through semi-structured interview with 10 respondents from the same group. The quantitative data will then be analysed using SPSS to look for patterns and trends whereas thematic analysis for the qualitative data will be done using NVivo. The findings will benefit curriculum developers and educators to maximise collaboration competency in students which subsequently supports the integration of ESD.

Keywords: community engagement, shared leadership, collaborative competency

INTRODUCTION

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an effort that supports United Nation's fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Globally, United Nation's Educational, scientific, Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is responsible to provide standards and guidance for ESD (UNESCO, 2024). Universiti Teknologi MARA also designs its curriculum based on ESD in which the courses are mapped to the eight competencies as lined by UNESCO. One of the courses that are based on service learning, Community Engagement for Professional Development (ELS303), focuses on Collaboration Competency. In this course, final year students are expected to be able to integrate leadership, autonomy and responsibilities in engaging with the local community.

Since leadership is a key element for the assessment in ELS303, this skill is given a lot of emphasis. However, it is also concerning that the integration of leadership is not thoroughly observed in all students with only a handful being able to take charge with great leadership qualities. While the lesson plans may be designed to encourage leadership, it is also imperative to understand the perceptive factors that influence students' leadership while carrying out their tasks before, during and after their engagement activities with the community. In relation to this, the proposed study aims to investigate the drivers influencing language students' leadership through community engagement activities. The proposed study intends to find answers to these questions:

1. What are the external factors that influence language students' leadership skills while participating in community engagement activities?

2. What are the internal factors that influence language students' leadership skills while participating in community engagement activities?

The objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

1. To investigate the external factors that influence language students' leadership skills while participating in community engagement activities.
2. To investigate the internal factors that influence language students' leadership skills while participating in community engagement activities.

The data for this study are expected to be collected qualitatively through questionnaire that will be distributed to 80 final year language students who are taking ELS303 course and qualitatively through semi-structured interview with 10 respondents from the same group. The quantitative data will then be analysed using SPSS to look for patterns and trends whereas thematic analysis for the qualitative data will be carried out using NVivo.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Engagement

Service Learning Malaysia – University for Society (SULAM) is an initiative that was introduced in 2016 by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia which is also a form of community engagement. With the intention of producing university graduates that are holistic, this initiative serves as an outlet for the university students to employ their skills, knowledge and competencies to offer a solution to the issues faced by the local community (UHEK, 2020). ELS303 is a SULAM-based course that is offered to final year language students pursuing Diploma in English for Professional Communication (LG120).

Although community engagement in higher learning institutions in Malaysia started in 2016, studies related to service learning or community engagement started earlier than that (Astin, 2000; Mitchell, 2008; Kearney, 2015) and the interest is still evident in the more recent years. Bidandi, Ambe and Mukong (2021) believed that challenges faced by students in executing community engagement activities are fundamental to higher education in South Africa. Interestingly, they also found that community engagement is necessary for policy development in the country (Bidandi, Ambe & Mukong, 2021). Aside from that, community engagement is also seen as a commonly used pedagogical approach to develop graduates with prosocial identity (McDougle & Li, 2022). This highlights the strength of incorporating community engagement in the curriculum. As for the assessment, Queiruga-Dios et al. (2022) concluded that since community engagement is extensively used as experiential education, the forms of assessment that come with it include teamwork presentation and survey that evaluates students' engagement as well as attitude. This is quite contrary to ELS303 that includes observation, report writing as well as peer evaluation as the segments of the assessment. It is also noteworthy that post-Covid19, digital technologies and artificial intelligence have made significant improvement in the living condition of the community, signalling the emergence of virtual service-learning (Garcia-Gutierrez, Ruiz-Corbella & Manjarres-Riesco, 2021). In comparison to ELS303, the inclusion of hybrid and online session as a part of community engagement activities is also encouraged to maximise the impact of the project.

In Malaysia, the recent studies seem to be interested in the positive impact of community engagement and its implementation in higher education. First of all, it is observed that the accumulated number of community engagement projects executed within the previous five years have brought positive impact to the local community in various areas including health of human and animals, creativity, culture and society, social welfare, commerce and economy, public policy, production, ethical practices, and environment (Siti, et al. 2023). In addition to that, Fong, Phaik and Poh (2025) also found that in Malaysian setting, service-learning is perceived as an effective experiential learning tool, suggesting a need for broader implementation in the curriculum. This partially echoes the findings from Queiruga-Dios et al. (2022). In analysing the perception of the community, Wan Nur Arina et al. (2024) concluded that the success of SULAM project is highly influenced by three key factors namely community needs, sustainable fundings and efficient management of the SULAM project.

All in all, it can be said that the synergy between the community participation and higher learning is too colossal to ignore.

Leadership Studies

Traditional leadership highlights the ability of one to lead the team and take charge of the tasks with heavier weightage on behalf of the team members. However, shared leadership strays away from this dominant behaviour, encouraging individuals to also develop leadership qualities even while taking subordinate roles. Ahsan, Hongwei and Boekhorst (2021) suggested that shared leadership leads to team creativity. This aligns with the assessments of ELS303 that requires each individual to develop leadership, projected through the engagement activities. Meanwhile, Castellano et al. (2021) highlighted the impact of shared leadership without disregarding the importance of self-leadership which is seen as a synergy in the performance of virtual R&D teams. These contrasting views may provide interesting results when they are explored in Malaysian higher education atmosphere.

Leadership in Community Engagement Curriculum

While studies in community engagement are abundant, the area of concerned that is leadership in community engagement is still at its infancy with the latest study closest to this nature conducted by

DISCUSSION

The potential findings will give greater understanding of the external and internal factors that may influence students' leadership skill, particularly shared leadership, in executing their community engagement projects. It will be interesting to know how external factors like rewards and recognition may affect students' development of leadership as compared to internal factors like self-satisfaction. While this study only focuses on the exploration of these factors, future studies may also investigate if gender plays a role in determining leadership quality in community engagement activities. The other areas that may provide rich understanding to community engagement is also how numeracy skill may impact decision making in planning for a community project.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the proposed study is an area that will add to the body of knowledge as far as leadership in community engagement is concerned. Service learning or community engagement in Malaysia provides a rich substance to be explored. While many have contributed to the worthiness of the integration of community engagement in the curriculum, studying the impact on leadership skills will be a huge contribution especially in mapping collaborative competency among tertiary level students in Malaysia. The potential findings will unquestionably benefit curriculum developers and educators to maximise the integration of ESD in the curriculum.

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