

Enhancing Awareness of Special Needs Primary Students through SULAM: A Service-Learning Approach

Albert Feisal Muhd Feisal Ismail^{*1}, Mohd Azman Abdullah², Mohd Amin Mohamad¹, Sharifah Fadiah Syed Zainol Abidin³, Fauziah Ahmad³ and Sharulnizam Wagiman³

¹Fakulti Pengurusan Teknologi dan Teknousahawanan, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka, Hang Tuah Jaya, 76100 Durian Tunggal, Melaka, Malaysia

²Faculty of Mechanical Technology and Engineering, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka, Hang Tuah Jaya, 76100 Durian Tunggal, Melaka, Malaysia

³Pusat Pemulihan Dalam Komuniti (PDK) Seri Utama, 6, Jalan TU 32, Taman Tasik Utama, 75350 Melaka, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The SULAM (Service-Learning Malaysia - University for Society) program, implemented within the Special Education Integration Program (*Program Pendidikan Khas Integrasi*) (PPKI) for students with disabilities (*Orang Kelainan Upaya*) (OKU) at Tun Syed Ahmad Shahabudin Primary School (*Sekolah Kebangsaan Tun Syed Ahmad Shahabudin*) (SK Tun SAS), represents an innovative and inclusive approach to assessment in special education. Departing from conventional examination practices that emphasize written assessments, SULAM adopts an oral-based evaluation framework designed to accommodate the diverse needs of learners with cognitive, physical, and sensory challenges. This approach enables OKU students to articulate their knowledge and understanding more effectively, thereby enhancing communication skills, increasing engagement, and reducing assessment-related barriers. In addition to improving academic assessment, the program plays a significant role in raising awareness and understanding of special needs among students, educators, and the wider school community. Through continuous interaction, participation, and exposure within the SULAM framework, non-OKU students and teachers develop greater empathy, inclusivity, and acceptance toward individuals with disabilities. This awareness contributes to a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, reducing stigma and promoting positive social integration. Beyond academic evaluation, SULAM integrates the cultivation of core ethical values, including honesty, responsibility, fairness, and respect, in alignment with the objectives of the PPKI curriculum. These values are embedded within teaching and assessment practices, fostering not only academic competence but also character development among students. Furthermore, the individualized learning approach within PPKI ensures that each student's unique needs are addressed through tailored support mechanisms, contributing to improved self-confidence, emotional resilience, and overall learning outcomes. Overall, the implementation of SULAM demonstrates its potential as a transformative assessment strategy that promotes inclusivity, awareness, holistic development, and equitable learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

Keywords: SULAM, Special Needs Primary Students, OKU (Persons with Disabilities), Inclusive Education, Awareness and Empathy

INTRODUCTION

University students often demonstrate limited awareness and understanding of primary school students with special needs and persons with disabilities (*Orang Kelainan Upaya*) (OKU), largely due to insufficient exposure and direct interaction with inclusive educational settings. Research has shown that misconceptions and stereotypes about individuals with disabilities persist among students, frequently stemming from inadequate knowledge and

lack of meaningful engagement (Belmonte et al., 2020; Mirete et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies indicate that limited awareness and gaps in knowledge within higher education can negatively influence attitudes toward people with disabilities and their inclusion in mainstream learning environments (Sniatecki et al., 2015). A systematic review by Freer (2021) highlights that students' attitudes toward disability play a significant role in shaping inclusive practices, with uninformed perceptions often hindering social participation and acceptance of students with special needs. In previous research, universities' students have engaged activities with special kids to prepare their requirements to enter primary schools (Abdullah et al., 2026). Their finding shows that, with proper planning and focused activities for psychomotor, the special kids may improvise their skills and meet the requirements to enter primary school. This engagement reflectively increased the awareness of universities' students to the special needs of the OKU students. In addition, prior research suggests that the absence of experiential learning opportunities contributes to reduced empathy and understanding among university students (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jacoby, 2015). This lack of awareness can result in an underestimation of the challenges faced by primary-level students with special needs, including communication barriers, accessibility limitations, and social exclusion (Moriña, 2017; Rao, 2004).

When university students lack awareness and understanding of OKU students, it significantly influences how they react, communicate, and socialize within inclusive settings. Limited knowledge and exposure often lead to uncertainty, discomfort, or inappropriate responses when interacting with students with special needs, resulting in avoidance or minimal engagement. This lack of awareness may also contribute to ineffective communication, as university students may not possess the necessary skills or sensitivity to adapt their language, tone, or behaviour to suit diverse needs, particularly for individuals with cognitive, hearing, or speech impairments. Furthermore, misconceptions and stereotypes can negatively shape social interactions, leading to exclusion, reduced collaboration, and a lack of meaningful relationships between peers. Research indicates that uninformed attitudes toward disability can hinder inclusive participation and reinforce social barriers, ultimately affecting the emotional well-being and sense of belonging of OKU students.

To address these challenges, scholars have increasingly advocated for experiential learning approaches, particularly service-learning, as an effective strategy to enhance awareness and promote inclusivity. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service-learning as a pedagogical approach that integrates community service with academic learning, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. This approach has been shown to improve students' understanding of social issues, including disability, while fostering empathy and civic responsibility. Eyler and Giles (1999) further demonstrate that service-learning enhances students' personal and interpersonal development, particularly in terms of empathy, ethical reasoning, and social awareness.

More recent studies have reinforced the effectiveness of service-learning in promoting disability awareness and inclusive mindsets. Jacoby (2015) highlights that structured community engagement activities provide opportunities for students to interact directly with marginalized groups, thereby challenging preconceived notions and reducing stigma. Additionally, Felten and Clayton (2011) argue that service-learning fosters reflective thinking, enabling students to critically examine their attitudes and assumptions toward individuals with disabilities. Through reflection and interaction, students develop a deeper appreciation of diversity and inclusivity, which are essential for supporting individuals with special needs.

Within the Malaysian context, initiatives such as Service-Learning Malaysia (SULAM) have been introduced to institutionalize community engagement as part of higher education curricula. SULAM emphasizes the integration of academic learning with community service, particularly in addressing societal challenges such as disability inclusion. By engaging university students with OKU communities, SULAM provides a platform for experiential learning that enhances awareness, empathy, and social responsibility. Such initiatives are especially relevant in bridging the awareness gap among students who have limited prior exposure to individuals with special needs, including those at the primary education level. For example, the OKU social entrepreneurship skills are developed and summarized for them to improve their employability skills (Ismail et al., 2026). This program was implemented through SULAM by students of *Fakulti Pengurusan Teknologi dan Teknousahawan, Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM)*.

Overall, the literature consistently highlights that limited awareness among university students regarding primary school students with special needs and OKU is a significant barrier to achieving inclusive education. This lack of

awareness is driven by insufficient exposure, misconceptions, and limited experiential learning opportunities. However, the integration of service-learning approaches, such as SULAM, offers a promising solution by providing direct engagement with communities, fostering empathy, and promoting positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. As such, enhancing awareness through structured and experiential learning initiatives is essential in preparing university students to contribute to inclusive and equitable educational environments.

In this paper, the integration of SULAM program with primary students with special needs provides a structured and meaningful platform to enhance students' awareness through direct interaction and experiential learning. Through SULAM activities, university students engage with OKU learners in real classroom and community settings, allowing them to observe diverse learning behaviours, communication styles, and individual needs firsthand. This exposure enables students to move beyond theoretical knowledge, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by primary students with disabilities, including barriers in communication, social participation, and learning processes. Active involvement, such as assisting in classroom activities, facilitating inclusive learning tasks, and participating in guided observations, encourages university students to reflect on their attitudes and assumptions toward disability. As a result, these interactions contribute significantly to the development of empathy, sensitivity, and inclusive awareness. By combining experiential engagement with reflective practice, SULAM serves as an effective pedagogical approach in bridging the awareness gap, ultimately preparing university students to respond more appropriately, communicate effectively, and build positive social relationships with individuals with special needs.

SULAM PROGRAM OBJECTIVES WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL

Supporting the Educational Development of Special Needs Students

This program aims to support the educational and social development of students with special needs. For example, students with Autism, Down Syndrome, and Tantrum-related behaviours. The activities are tailored to enhance fine motor skills, manipulative abilities, and overall engagement. The objective is to ensure that these children receive the same opportunities for growth at the same age.

Enhancing Public Awareness of Inclusivity

One of the core objectives is to raise awareness of the challenges faced by children with special needs and the importance of inclusivity in education. The program provides an avenue for students by working with PPKI. Therefore, the community can also better understand disabilities and advocate for the rights and opportunities of children with special needs.

Strengthening University-Community Partnerships

The program fosters collaboration between university students, educators, and community stakeholders. This partnership strengthens the relationship between educational institutions and local communities. It also creates a supportive network that benefits both parties. The program highlights the value of teamwork and shared goals in addressing societal challenges through interactions with PPKI staff and students.

Developing Leadership and Empathy Among Students

The SULAM-BTMT3383 program provides students with hands-on experience in engaging with the community, particularly in a sensitive and impactful context. Besides, students can develop critical soft skills such as leadership, communication, and empathy by participating in the program. These competencies are important for personal and professional growth to prepare students for real-world challenges.

Promoting Long-Term Community Engagement

The program is not limited to short-term benefits; it is also designed to establish sustainable community initiatives. Additionally, the program contributes to long-term community development and sets the foundation for future collaborations by raising awareness and promoting inclusivity.

Through this collaborative initiative, the SULAM-BTMT 3383 program can enhance the learning experiences of university students. Moreover, it also creates a meaningful impact on the lives of special needs children at PPKI, their families, and the broader community.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted within the framework of the SULAM initiative, embedded in the BTMT3383 Social Entrepreneurship course. The project involved Year 4 Bachelor of Technology Management (BTMM) students, who participated in a structured community engagement program in collaboration with the Community Rehabilitation Centre (PPDK) and the Special Education Integration Program (PPKI) at SK Tun SAS, Melaka. A total of approximately 70 students enrolled in the course were involved in the SULAM program over a three-week period (Teaching Weeks 11–13). The students were divided into 13 groups, with each group assigned to specific community partners and tasks to ensure effective implementation of activities and focused engagement.

SK Tun SAS is recognized as one of the leading schools in Melaka with a high enrolment of students with special needs, particularly those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), alongside other conditions such as Down syndrome and behavior-related challenges (e.g., tantrum-related behaviors). The study adopted a qualitative, observation-based approach, where university students engaged directly with primary-level OKU students through structured visits, classroom participation, and interactive learning activities. These engagements enabled students to observe behavioral patterns, communication styles, and learning needs in real educational settings.

Data were primarily collected through reflective observations, field notes, and guided interactions with students and teachers. This experiential approach allowed university students to develop a deeper understanding of the diverse characteristics and needs of children with disabilities, moving beyond theoretical knowledge toward practical awareness. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the engagement, ensuring respect for the rights, dignity, and inclusion of special needs students in all activities. The SULAM framework facilitated continuous reflection among participants, encouraging critical thinking on inclusivity, empathy, and social responsibility. Through this methodology, the study aims to evaluate how direct interaction and observation within an authentic environment contribute to enhancing awareness and understanding of primary students with special needs among university students.

Through collaboration with Puan Hanisah, the senior assistant teacher of the PPKI, the students gained valuable insights into the complexities and pedagogical considerations involved in educating children with special needs. Her guidance facilitated a deeper understanding of differentiated teaching strategies, individualized support systems, and adaptive learning approaches designed to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students. The participants actively engaged in classroom activities and conducted structured observations to examine how the curriculum was modified to accommodate diverse learning needs, particularly for students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, and other developmental conditions.

The primary focus of this engagement was to enhance students' awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by PPKI learners while contributing meaningfully to their educational and social development through tailored activities and interventions. This collaborative experience enabled students to observe instructional practices, participate in learning facilitation, and explore strategies for improving student engagement and inclusivity within the classroom environment. Furthermore, it provided opportunities to reflect critically on their own perceptions and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, thereby fostering empathy and inclusive mindsets.

Overall, the objectives of the project were aligned with the principles of SULAM, aiming to support both the special needs students and the broader community through active university–school collaboration. The initiative sought not only to enhance the learning experiences and well-being of PPKI students at SK Tun Sas but also to cultivate socially responsible graduates with heightened awareness, sensitivity, and commitment toward inclusive education.

EVALUATION

The evaluation of the SULAM program adopts a mixed-method approach to assess the effectiveness of its activities in achieving key objectives, namely enhancing awareness, promoting inclusivity, and improving educational understanding of the special needs community. Multimedia outputs, particularly video content, are evaluated based on their level of audience engagement and alignment with the intended learning outcomes and awareness goals. Quantitative performance indicators, including view counts, audience retention rates, and social media engagement metrics (e.g., likes, comments, and shares), are systematically analyzed alongside qualitative feedback obtained from key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and program participants. In addition, infographic materials are assessed in terms of design quality, clarity of information, and relevance to the target audience, with effectiveness measured through dissemination metrics such as shares, downloads, and user feedback regarding content comprehensibility and usefulness.

Furthermore, awareness and knowledge-building interventions, including workshops and interactive sessions, are evaluated through participant attendance, engagement levels, and structured pre- and post-intervention surveys designed to capture changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions toward individuals with special needs. Behavioural indicators, such as demonstrated empathy, communication improvements, and knowledge retention, are also examined through reflective observations and facilitator assessments. The program's digital outreach is further measured through social media analytics, including reach, impressions, and engagement rates, while the performance of designated program hashtags is analyzed to determine the extent of online visibility and public awareness generated. Collectively, these evaluation measures provide a comprehensive assessment of the program's impact in fostering awareness, inclusivity, and meaningful engagement with the OKU community.

OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The PPKI at SK Tun SAS in Melaka stands as a leading educational institution dedicated to supporting students with special needs, including those with Autism, Down Syndrome, and Tantrum-related behaviors. As the school with the largest number of special needs students in the state, PPKI plays a vital role in fostering inclusivity and providing opportunities for these children to thrive. Among the special needs students, those with Autism represent the largest group, highlighting the importance of tailored educational programs and facilities to cater to their unique needs.

However, despite the school's commendable efforts, there remains a significant gap in public awareness regarding the challenges faced by special children and the importance of supporting them. This gap can be attributed to a limited understanding of disabilities such as Autism, Down Syndrome, and Tantrums, and a lack of visibility around the OKU-friendly (Orang Kurang Upaya) facilities available at the school. As a result, it is crucial to address these issues to ensure that the rights of these children are not overlooked and their needs are met in a supportive, inclusive environment (Table 1).

Table 1: Problems and solutions

NO	PROBLEMS	PROPOSED SOLUTIONS
1.	Lack of Awareness and Understanding - Limited knowledge of Autism, Down Syndrome, Tantrums, and the rights of special children.	Public Awareness Campaigns - Develop and distribute educational content (videos, infographics) about Autism, Down Syndrome, Tantrums, and OKU rights. Promote through social media and events.
2.	Insufficient Advocacy and Visibility - Limited promotion of OKU-friendly facilities and support systems, leading to low community engagement.	Promotion of OKU-Friendly Facilities - Highlight OKU-friendly facilities at SK TUN SAS. Use social media, newsletters, and public events to increase visibility.
3.	Need for Tailored Educational Resources - Lack of accessible and engaging resources to educate the public about inclusivity and special children.	Educational Storytelling Materials - Create engaging content (storybooks, videos) to promote empathy and inclusivity. Use characters with disabilities to educate children.

4.	Barriers to Accessibility - OKU-friendly facilities may not be optimized or publicized to meet the needs of disabled individuals.	Inclusivity Workshops and Events - Organize workshops, open houses, and seminars to promote inclusivity and educate the public on OKU-friendly facilities.
5.	Limited Community Engagement - Insufficient collaboration with external organizations, businesses, and stakeholders for better support.	Strengthened Community Collaboration - Partner with NGOs, government bodies, and private businesses to secure funding and resources for OKU-friendly initiatives.

SUMMARY BUSINESS MODEL

Since the university course is about Social Entrepreneurship, the output of the program is summarized in a business model canvas for the SULAM-OKU awareness initiative (Table 2).

Key Partners

The success of the SULAM-OKU initiative relies on strategic collaborations with multiple stakeholders. Educational institutions such as SK Tun SAS serve as primary engagement sites, providing access to special needs students and real-world learning environments. Partnerships with OKU organizations and PPDK ensure authenticity, inclusivity, and alignment with community needs. In addition, collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) strengthen outreach, advocacy efforts, and resource sharing. Local businesses contribute through sponsorships, funding, and logistical support, while social media influencers enhance visibility and amplify awareness campaigns to a broader audience.

Key Activities

The initiative focuses on a range of integrated activities designed to create both educational and social impact. These include the development of digital content such as videos and infographics, aimed at disseminating knowledge and raising awareness about OKU. Students actively collaborate with OKU individuals, engaging in experiential learning to better understand their needs and challenges. The program also involves organizing workshops, awareness campaigns, and community engagement sessions, targeting both students and the general public. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of impact is conducted through data analytics, feedback mechanisms, and reflective assessments to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

Value Propositions

The initiative delivers a multi-dimensional value proposition. Primarily, it aims to raise awareness and understanding of the OKU community, addressing misconceptions and promoting social acceptance. It also seeks to foster inclusivity and empathy among participants, particularly university students, by providing direct exposure and interaction with individuals with disabilities. Additionally, the use of educational storytelling and digital media offers engaging, accessible, and impactful ways to communicate important messages, making the initiative both informative and transformative.

Customer Relationships

The program emphasizes building meaningful and trust-based relationships with its stakeholders. This is achieved through authentic storytelling, highlighting real-life experiences of OKU individuals to foster emotional connection and understanding. The initiative promotes interactive engagement, allowing audiences to participate in discussions, activities, and feedback sessions. Regular content updates and communication via social media platforms help maintain audience interest and involvement. Furthermore, opportunities for active participation in programs and campaigns encourage long-term engagement and community ownership.

Customer Segments

The initiative targets diverse groups, including the OKU community, who are both beneficiaries and active participants. The general public forms a key audience for awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and

promoting inclusivity. Schools, educators, and students benefit from educational content and experiential learning opportunities that support inclusive practices. Additionally, NGOs and businesses represent stakeholders interested in corporate social responsibility (CSR), community development, and collaborative initiatives.

Key Resources

The program leverages both institutional and technological resources. Institutional support is provided through SULAM UTeM, which facilitates program structure, funding opportunities, and academic integration. Key technological resources include digital production tools, content creation software, and social media platforms used for dissemination and engagement. Human resources, particularly university students and facilitators, play a critical role in executing activities, developing content, and sustaining community engagement.

Channels

The initiative primarily utilizes digital platforms, especially TikTok and Instagram, to disseminate content and engage with a wide audience. These platforms are chosen due to their high user engagement, visual-oriented nature, and accessibility. In addition, physical channels, such as workshops, school visits, and community events, are used to facilitate direct interaction and experiential learning. This hybrid approach ensures both online visibility and offline impact.

Cost Structure

The cost structure of the program includes several key components. Content creation costs cover equipment, software subscriptions, and production expenses. Marketing costs, including social media advertisements and promotional materials, are necessary to maximize reach and engagement. Additionally, operational expenses, such as transportation for site visits, workshop materials, and logistical arrangements, are required to support on-ground activities and ensure program effectiveness.

Table 2: Business model

Key Partners: SK Tun Syed Ahmad Shahabudin OKU Organization NGOs Local Businesses Social Media Influencers	Key Activities: Create video and infographic content. Collaborate with OKU members Organize workshops/campaigns Monitor Impact	Value Propositions: Raise awareness about OKU. Promote inclusivity Educational, impact storytelling	Customer Relationships: Build trust through storytelling Interactive engagement Consistent updates Participation opportunities	Customer: OKU community General Public Schools, education, students NGOs, businesses
	Key Resources: SULAM UTeM Software tools		Channels: Tiktok Instagram	
Cost Structure: Content creation (equipment, software) Marketing (ads) Operational expenses (transportation)		Revenue Streams: Donations Sponsorships Crowdfunding Grants		

Revenue Streams

Although primarily a social impact initiative, the program sustains its activities through diversified funding sources. These include donations from individuals and organizations, corporate sponsorships, and crowdfunding campaigns to support specific initiatives. Furthermore, government or institutional grants, particularly those aligned with education and community development, provide essential financial support for long-term sustainability.

This business model demonstrates a sustainable, impact-driven SULAM initiative that integrates education,

community engagement, and digital innovation. It aligns with social entrepreneurship principles by addressing societal challenges (OKU awareness and inclusivity) while leveraging collaborative partnerships and measurable impact strategies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the implementation of the SULAM-based initiative successfully achieved its primary objectives of enhancing awareness, promoting inclusivity, and improving understanding of primary students with special needs and OKU. Through structured engagement, direct interaction, and observation within the PPKI at SK Tun SAS, university students developed a deeper appreciation of the challenges faced by these learners, particularly in terms of communication, learning diversity, and social inclusion. The experiential nature of SULAM enabled students to move beyond theoretical knowledge, fostering empathy, positive attitudes, and inclusive mindsets, which are essential for supporting individuals with disabilities in educational and societal contexts.

The proposed business model further strengthens the sustainability and scalability of the initiative by integrating key partnerships, digital engagement strategies, and community-driven activities. By leveraging collaborations with schools, OKU organizations, NGOs, and digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, the model provides a structured approach to continuously disseminating awareness and educational content. The inclusion of diverse revenue streams, including sponsorships, grants, and crowdfunding, also ensures the long-term viability of the program while maintaining its social impact orientation.

Despite its success, several challenges were identified, including limited initial awareness among university students, communication barriers during interactions with OKU learners, and constraints related to resources and time. To address these issues, the study suggests several practical solutions, including the integration of more structured pre-engagement training for students, incorporation of assistive communication techniques, and strengthening collaboration with special education professionals. Additionally, continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be enhanced to measure long-term impact and ensure continuous improvement of program delivery.

Overall, this study highlights the effectiveness of SULAM as a transformative pedagogical approach in bridging the awareness gap between university students and individuals with special needs. By combining experiential learning, community engagement, and digital innovation, the initiative not only contributes to the holistic development of students but also promotes a more inclusive and empathetic society. Future implementations should focus on expanding such models across institutions to further increased awareness, reduce stigma, and strengthen inclusive education practices at both local and national levels.

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