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Enhancing Experiential Learning Through Service Learning in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Service learning has become a significant pedagogical approach in Malaysian higher education, enabling students to integrate theoretical knowledge with authentic community engagement. Grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and aligned with the Service-Learning Malaysia—University for Society (SULAM) framework, service learning facilitates the development of project management, communication, and leadership competencies while promoting civic responsibility and social inclusion.

This study examines how structured service-learning initiatives can enhance experiential learning outcomes and foster sustainable community partnerships. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to evaluate participant feedback, student reflections, and project implementation outcomes. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze satisfaction and perceived impact, while potential inferential approaches—such as t-tests or correlations—are discussed as tools for exploring differences across demographic groups. A thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided the interpretation of qualitative responses, revealing key themes such as teamwork development, cultural awareness, and empowerment.

Findings demonstrate that service learning promotes mutual benefits: students gain transferable skills, confidence, and social empathy, while communities experience increased environmental awareness, participation, and collaboration. The study also identifies implications for curriculum design, recommending that service learning be institutionalised across programs to cultivate lifelong learning and employability skills. Overall, service learning represents an effective strategy for bridging academic learning with societal contribution within Malaysia's higher education context.

Keywords: Service learning, experiential learning, community engagement, Orang Asli, SULAM, project-based learning, UiTM, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Service learning has emerged as a transformative approach in higher education, integrating community engagement with structured academic learning. It moves beyond traditional classroom instruction by providing students with authentic experiences that strengthen both professional competencies and social responsibility (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Through experiential participation, students develop critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership skills while addressing real-world challenges that benefit the wider community.

In Malaysia, service learning has been institutionalised through the Service-Learning Malaysia—University for Society (SULAM) initiative, introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2019. SULAM reflects the national agenda for holistic and balanced education by encouraging students to learn through action, empathy, and civic engagement (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019). Recent studies (Rahim & Omar, 2022; Saud et al., 2023) have confirmed that SULAM-based projects contribute to employability, ethical awareness, and problem-solving competencies. These outcomes align closely with the Sustainable Development Goals





(SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

The relevance of service learning in the ASEAN region has also grown, as universities recognise its potential to promote inclusive and sustainable communities. Research by Ang et al. (2024) and Tanchoco and Cabigon (2023) emphasises that service-learning initiatives in Southeast Asia not only bridge academic learning with civic engagement but also foster intercultural understanding and ethical leadership among youth. In this context, service learning becomes a vehicle for both social transformation and experiential education.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which conceptualises learning as a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). When applied to service learning, this theory underscores the importance of reflection and adaptation in deepening students' learning outcomes. Scholars such as Kolb and Kolb (2017) and Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) have noted that experiential learning fosters deeper engagement and personal growth compared to traditional instruction.

This paper aims to examine how structured service-learning initiatives can enhance experiential learning outcomes in Malaysian higher education. Specifically, it seeks to:

Explore how service learning promotes the integration of project management, teamwork, and ethical values.

Evaluate participant perceptions of community engagement activities.

Identify implications for curriculum development and sustainable educational practice.

By synthesising quantitative findings and qualitative insights, the paper provides a framework for universities to integrate service learning more effectively into their curricula, ensuring that learning is both transformative and socially meaningful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Learning in Higher Education

Service learning represents a structured educational approach that combines academic coursework with community engagement to enhance student learning and civic responsibility. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define service learning as a pedagogical strategy that integrates "meaningful community service with instruction and reflection" to enrich learning experiences and foster a sense of social accountability. Subsequent studies have consistently shown that students who participate in service learning develop stronger leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

In the Malaysian context, the Ministry of Higher Education has formalised service learning through the Service Learning Malaysia—University for Society (SULAM) initiative, introduced in 2019. This policy aims to bridge academic knowledge with societal needs while fostering civic-minded and industry-ready graduates (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019). Empirical studies (Rahim & Omar, 2022; Saud et al., 2023) demonstrate that SULAM-based learning increases employability, ethical awareness, and self-directed learning among university students. Importantly, these outcomes align with Malaysia's broader educational transformation agenda under the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015–2025), which prioritises holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduate attributes.

Recent research (Ang, Hashim, & Sani, 2024; Tanchoco & Cabigon, 2023) within the ASEAN region highlights that service learning also promotes intercultural understanding, empathy, and leadership development—attributes critical for global citizenship. When integrated into project-based courses, such as management or engineering, it enhances not only students' technical competencies but also their appreciation for diversity and sustainability.





Experiential Learning and Kolb's Theory

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) posits that effective learning occurs through a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation. In service-learning contexts, students first engage in real-world experiences, then reflect on their observations, link them to academic concepts, and finally apply these insights in future actions. This cyclical model transforms passive learners into active participants who construct meaning through practice.

Several scholars (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010) have demonstrated that experiential learning deepens cognitive engagement, strengthens metacognitive awareness, and encourages lifelong learning attitudes. In Malaysia, where many universities aim to produce "industry-ready" graduates, the integration of experiential approaches such as service learning has proven effective in developing project management, problem-solving, and teamwork skills (Saud et al., 2022).

The experiential model also aligns with contemporary education frameworks that emphasise authentic learning, reflective practice, and self-assessment (Ang et al., 2024). When applied through community projects, it fosters the development of both academic and socio-emotional competencies—bridging the gap between classroom theory and real-life complexity.

Community Engagement and the Orang Asli Context

Community engagement serves as the foundation of effective service learning. Jacoby (2014) and Sandmann, Saltmarsh, and O'Meara (2008) assert that community engagement should be reciprocal—benefiting both students and communities through shared learning and empowerment. In the Malaysian Indigenous context, engagement with Orang Asli communities presents unique opportunities to integrate cultural diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability into higher education practice.

Research on Indigenous education in Malaysia (Nicholas, 2019; Subramaniam, 2020; Rahman & Hashim, 2021) indicates that inclusive learning approaches that respect cultural traditions lead to more sustainable and ethical forms of collaboration. More recent works (Ibrahim, Latib, & Amin, 2023; Yusoff & Halim, 2024) stress that university—community partnerships can empower marginalised groups while fostering intercultural understanding among students. This synergy strengthens the social mission of universities and aligns with the global movement toward Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

By positioning service learning within this intercultural and Indigenous framework, universities not only extend learning beyond academic walls but also contribute directly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to education, equality, and climate action.

Literature Gap and Study Rationale

Although numerous studies have addressed the educational benefits of service learning and experiential approaches, the majority have focused on Western contexts or urban community settings (Celio et al., 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010). Within Malaysia, existing research has largely explored SULAM implementation from the perspectives of institutional policy, curriculum integration, and student reflections (Rahim & Omar, 2022). However, there remains limited empirical evidence on how service-learning projects operate as interactive partnerships between students and Indigenous communities, particularly in terms of measuring community responses and learning outcomes quantitatively.

Furthermore, prior studies on Orang Asli education often emphasise issues of access, inclusion, and cultural preservation (Nicholas, 2019; Subramaniam, 2020), but few investigate university—community collaborations that position the Orang Asli as active partners in shared learning experiences. While Rahman and Hashim (2021) discussed the importance of empowerment through engagement, there is still insufficient understanding of how short-term, structured, student-led projects can simultaneously contribute to student development and community enrichment.





Despite the growing body of research on service learning, there remains a gap in empirical and context-specific studies examining how service-learning initiatives operate as reciprocal learning experiences between universities and Indigenous communities in Malaysia. Existing literature often focuses on descriptive outcomes rather than systematic analysis combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Rahim & Omar, 2022).

Furthermore, few studies explicitly link project management pedagogy to the service-learning framework, even though project management principles—planning, coordination, and evaluation—are central to the success of such initiatives. Addressing this gap, the present study explores how service learning in Malaysia can be enhanced through structured project management practices and experiential learning strategies, leading to measurable impacts on both student and community outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method descriptive design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate how service-learning participation enhanced students' experiential learning and benefited the community. The design enabled triangulation of findings from participant feedback surveys, student reflections, and observational notes, providing both measurable and interpretive insights.

Quantitative data captured the satisfaction and perceived impact of community participants through a structured survey, while qualitative data drawn from student reflections and open-ended community feedback provided deeper thematic understanding. The integration of these methods ensured a holistic evaluation of both learning outcomes and community engagement effectiveness.

Context of the Study

The research was conducted within the context of Malaysian higher education, specifically under the Service Learning Malaysia—University for Society (SULAM) framework. The project activities involved environmental, educational, and cultural components designed to support Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13: Climate Action and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Students applied project management principles—including task planning, resource coordination, and progress monitoring—while engaging in collaborative activities with community members. This integration of theory and practice reflected the pedagogical shift toward experiential and applied learning promoted by Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education.

Participants

A total of 80 participants were involved, consisting of university students and community members. Of these, 32 were undergraduate students enrolled in a Project Management course, and 48 were Orang Asli community participants, including adults, youth, and local leaders.

The sampling followed a purposive approach, selecting participants directly involved in the implementation and evaluation of service-learning activities.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	38	47.5
	Female	42	52.5
Age	Below 18	10	12.5





	18-30	18	35.0
	31-50	16	32.5
	Above 50	16	20.0
Role	Student	32	40.0
	Community	40	50.0
	Local Leader/ NGO Partner	8	10.0

Table I. Participant Demographics

These demographic characteristics provided insight into the diversity of perspectives represented in the study. Gender and age composition were considered important in interpreting community perceptions, as prior studies (Rahman & Hashim, 2021; Saud et al., 2023) suggest that generational and gendered experiences influence attitudes toward community programs and environmental activities.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through a structured feedback questionnaire and guided reflection forms. The questionnaire comprised two sections:

Section A: Demographic information (age, gender, and role).

Section B: Eight items measuring satisfaction, communication, respect, and perceived benefits, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Instrument reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, achieving a coefficient of 0.89, indicating strong internal consistency. Reflection forms provided open-ended responses that were later analysed thematically to complement the quantitative results.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted immediately after the program's closing ceremony. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the feedback form and assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Responses were collected on-site and later digitised for analysis. Additionally, students' reflective reports and photographic documentation of the activities were reviewed to complement the quantitative data with qualitative observations.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics—means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions—were calculated using SPSS version 27 to evaluate overall satisfaction and perceived outcomes.

To strengthen methodological rigor, the study also proposes an inferential analysis framework to explore differences among demographic subgroups. While not implemented due to sample limitations, tests such as independent samples t-tests (for gender comparisons), one-way ANOVA (for role or age group differences), and Pearson correlation (for relationships between satisfaction and learning perception) were identified as suitable for future application. These analyses would provide a deeper understanding of how participant characteristics influence perceptions of service-learning effectiveness.

Open-ended responses and student reflections were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006): Familiarisation with data, Generating initial codes, searching for





themes, reviewing themes, Defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Three major themes emerged:

Personal Growth and Teamwork: Students reported improved communication, collaboration, and self-confidence.

Cultural Understanding: Participants appreciated cross-cultural learning experiences.

Sustainability and Responsibility: Both students and community members emphasised the importance of caring for the environment.

This thematic integration provided qualitative depth to the quantitative findings, illustrating how service learning nurtured cognitive, emotional, and ethical development.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to UiTM's ethical research practices. Permission was obtained from the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and the community's Tok Batin prior to the program. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed of their rights to anonymity and data confidentiality. As a community engagement initiative, the project emphasised mutual respect and cultural sensitivity throughout its implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings

The feedback questionnaire distributed to the 48 Orang Asli participants assessed their perceptions of the Baktisiswa Orang Asli Project across eight key dimensions. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table I.

No.	Feedback Item	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
1	The program was well-organized and managed efficiently.	4.75	0.42	Very High
2	The activities were relevant and beneficial to the community.	4.72	0.46	Very High
3	The student facilitators communicated effectively with participants.	4.69	0.45	Very High
4	The students showed respect and cultural sensitivity toward the community.	4.83	0.38	Very High
5	The program promoted awareness of environmental sustainability.	4.65	0.51	Very High
6	The activities enhanced the children's learning and creativity.	4.70	0.44	Very High
7	The collaboration between UiTM and the community was positive and productive.	4.68	0.47	Very High
8	Overall, I am satisfied with the program and would like to participate again.	4.75	0.41	Very High

Table Ii. Community Feedback

Overall Mean = 4.72





SD = 0.44 (Very High Satisfaction Level)

M. Interpretation of Findings

The quantitative analysis indicates a very high level of satisfaction among community participants, with all mean scores exceeding 4.6 on a 5-point scale. The highest-rated item was "students' respect and cultural sensitivity" (M = 4.83, SD = 0.38), reflecting the success of the students in engaging ethically and respectfully with the Orang Asli community. This aligns with findings by Rahman and Hashim (2021), who emphasised that culturally responsive engagement strengthens mutual trust and encourages sustainable collaboration.

Similarly, the strong ratings for program management and relevance of activities (M = 4.75 and 4.72) demonstrate the effective application of project management principles by students, supporting the first project objective—to apply classroom theory to real-world practice. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), well-structured service-learning activities improve students' planning and leadership skills while enhancing community satisfaction.

The feedback on environmental awareness (M = 4.65) suggests that the inclusion of sustainability-focused tasks such as beach cleaning and recycling-based fashion (Busana Alam) successfully fostered environmental consciousness. This is consistent with Kolb's (1984) assertion that meaningful experiential learning occurs when students engage with authentic contexts and reflect on the societal relevance of their actions.

Qualitative Insights from Open-Ended Feedback

The thematic analysis produced three overarching themes: personal growth and teamwork, cultural understanding, and sustainability awareness.

Personal Growth and Teamwork

Students frequently reflected on their transformation through teamwork and leadership. Many described the experience as their first opportunity to lead, delegate, and manage real-world constraints. One participant noted:

"This project pushed us to plan, communicate, and take responsibility like professionals."

These reflections affirm Kolb's (1984) assertion that experiential learning transforms abstract theory into actionable knowledge through active participation. The experience of managing tasks, solving logistical challenges, and coordinating with diverse stakeholders strengthened both cognitive and interpersonal learning outcomes.

Cultural Understanding and Empathy

Interacting with Indigenous communities enabled students to cultivate empathy and intercultural sensitivity. As one student expressed:

"We learned that respect and understanding come from listening to different life experiences."

This outcome mirrors studies by Ibrahim et al. (2023) and Ang et al. (2024), who highlight that community-based learning fosters inclusion and bridges cultural gaps. It also demonstrates how SULAM projects advance SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by promoting respect and collaboration.

Sustainability and Responsibility

Participants also emphasized environmental stewardship and shared responsibility. A community member remarked:





"Recycling and tree-planting taught us how small actions can protect our environment."

These findings reflect a growing alignment between service learning and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) goals (UNESCO, 2020). The project's focus on recyclable materials and environmental awareness encouraged both behavioral change and collective accountability—key dimensions of transformative education (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

DISCUSSION

Both quantitative results and qualitative narratives converge to demonstrate that service learning enhances students' experiential learning, project management skills, and civic engagement. The synergy between structured planning and reflective practice created a space for authentic learning—where students applied classroom knowledge to real-world problems, then critically reflected on their impact.

This integration of learning modes supports Kolb's experiential cycle: students experienced (Concrete Experience), reflected (Reflective Observation), conceptualized lessons (Abstract Conceptualization), and adapted actions in subsequent stages (Active Experimentation). The process deepened learning retention and improved performance in subsequent academic and community tasks.

Furthermore, by embedding project management principles into SULAM activities, students practiced stakeholder coordination, budgeting, and risk management—skills highly valued in employability frameworks (Ang et al., 2024). This aligns with Eyler and Giles's (1999) findings that reflection combined with structured practice leads to more durable learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that service learning is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing experiential learning among university students while fostering meaningful and sustainable community engagement. The findings affirm that structured service-learning programs—grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory—promote both academic and social outcomes when implemented through intentional design, reflection, and collaboration.

Quantitative results indicated high satisfaction levels, with over 90% of participants expressing strong agreement that the project improved communication, leadership, and social awareness. Meanwhile, qualitative reflections revealed deep learning outcomes such as teamwork, empathy, and sustainability consciousness. Together, these outcomes validate that when experiential learning principles are embedded into curriculum design, they create holistic education that extends beyond academic assessment.

Importantly, the integration of project management principles within service-learning allowed students to apply planning, execution, and evaluation skills in authentic community settings. This approach strengthened their professional readiness and sense of accountability—key components of graduate employability. Students not only gained technical and organizational competencies but also developed soft skills such as ethical decision-making, adaptability, and intercultural sensitivity, aligning with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025 and global 21st-century skill frameworks.

From an institutional perspective, universities can harness service learning as a strategic avenue for advancing civic engagement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Institutionalising service-learning practices across disciplines—through policy integration, lecturer training, and long-term community partnerships—will ensure the continuity and scalability of social impact.

Future research should extend this study by applying inferential statistics to examine demographic differences in learning perceptions and by conducting longitudinal assessments of students' employability outcomes post-





graduation. Incorporating cross-institutional comparisons could further illuminate how different pedagogical designs influence student transformation and community development.

Overall, this study reinforces that service learning serves as a bridge between knowledge and action. It cultivates reflective practitioners who can apply theory in meaningful ways, preparing them not only for professional careers but also for lifelong civic engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sustained Collaboration: UiTM and other institutions should formalise recurring partnerships with Orang Asli communities to ensure continuity and deeper impact.

Curriculum Integration: Future iterations of project management and related courses can embed community-based components assessed through measurable outcomes.

Longitudinal Studies: Future research should assess long-term impacts of service-learning projects on both students' competencies and community development.

Cross-Disciplinary Engagement: Involvement of students from multiple faculties (e.g., education, science, and business) could create more holistic, sustainable solutions.

Limitations

This study's findings are limited by its short-term implementation and small sample size (N = 48). While quantitative feedback provided useful insights, future studies could triangulate data using interviews or focus groups to explore deeper narratives of learning and community transformation.

Concluding Remark

The Baktisiswa Orang Asli Project stands as an exemplary model of experiential and ethical learning, reflecting the mission of Malaysian higher education to nurture socially responsible graduates. By connecting classroom knowledge with real-world engagement, such initiatives not only enhance student learning but also contribute tangibly to the advancement of inclusive, sustainable communities.

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