

Achieving Quality Education through Service-Learning Activities

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Abstract

Studies show mismatches between educational outcomes and labour market needs. Employers value soft skills and work experience over academic and professional qualifications. Even graduates admit they lack the soft skills and work experience needed for a good job. Soft skills include strong work ethics, good communication skills, creative and analytical thinking, challenge-solving skills, teamwork, a positive attitude, learning from criticism, and working under pressure. Recognizing the importance of education, Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to provide quality education for all and promote lifelong learning. SDG 4 expects youth and adults to be able to acquire problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication, and conflict-resolution skills. Service-learning is one method for imparting to students the above skills. Research on how service-learning can improve accounting education is limited. Therefore, this study aims to gain insight into students' service-learning experiences. The study aimed to align service-learning with SDG 4 goals.

Keywords: Service-learning, quality education, Sustainable Development Goal 4

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an intergovernmental agreement that serves as a plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity. It includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are integrated and indivisible, balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. Education is the key to achieving SDGs. People can break the cycle of poverty if they can get a good education. As a result, education aids in the reduction of inequalities and the attainment of gender equality. It also empowers people all over the world to live healthier, more sustainable lives. Education is also important for fostering interpersonal tolerance and contributing to more peaceful societies. In fact, education is linked to almost all of the other SDGs in one way or another.

Realising the importance of education, education is essentially articulated as a stand-alone goal i.e. SDG 4: Quality Education. SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. There are 10 targets under SDG 4, and target number four focuses on substantially increasing the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. The skills that the SDG expects youth and adult to acquire is beyond work-specific skills, which are problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills, and conflict resolution. One of the strategies to equip students with the above skills is using experiential learning, i.e. service-learning.

According to the Ministry of Education in Malaysia, service-learning is defined as a form of experiential learning that takes place through a life cycle of action and reflection when students apply what they have learned to fulfil the real needs of a community (Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2015-2025). Experiential learning has been proven as an effective teaching-and-learning approach because students have the chance to apply theoretical

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knowledge while engaging in service-learning projects (Najah Nadiah & Hamdi, 2017). In other words, service-learning provides opportunities for students to link course material with real-world experience.

The role of the universities in Malaysia is to prepare the youth for educational transformation through the higher learning education system, in parallel with the needs and challenges of the future. Through Malaysia Education Blue Print 2015-2025 (for Higher Education), the universities in Malaysia have been targeting to (i) produce holistic graduates who are entrepreneurial and balanced, (ii) improve students' learning experience, and (iii) expand collaboration between industries, government agencies and communities. Measures have been implemented in curriculum and academic programmes by increasing experiential learning and service-learning.

One of the schools at Universiti Utara Malaysia, Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz School of Accountancy (TISSA-UUM), has integrated service-learning into the Management Accounting course. The goal of embedded service-learning at the TISSA-UUM programme is to serve as a learning strategy in which students must apply classroom knowledge to solving real-world problems or issues in a community. This will assist students in becoming active lifelong learners who recognise the broad social significance of the accounting profession. The value of accounting's profound impact on society at various levels cannot be realised without first understanding society and its complexities. This goal is consistent with SDG 4, which lists the expected required skills that each youth (in this case, graduates) must possess, which are problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills, and conflict resolution.

However, research on how service-learning could enhance students' learning skills specifically in accounting education is still limited. Therefore, this study is aimed to examine the students' learning experiences from the implementation of the service-learning activity. The study also aimed to provide recommendations to ensure the alignment of service-learning activity with the aims of SDG 4.

1.1 Problem statement

SDG 4: Quality Education refers to all aspects of school and its surrounding education community, the rights of the whole child, and all children, for survival, protection, development and participation at the learning center (Haron, Sajari, Ishak, 2021). In Malaysia, education is under the responsibility of the federal government and all educational matters are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Higher Learning (MOHE). Both ministries are expected to promote the teaching of soft skills, including 'learning to learn' skills, emphasize work-based learning to better match the supply of and demand for skills, incentivize employers to provide work-based learning, and widely publicize and support the use of the Critical Occupations List to identify & more effectively address skills shortages (Khazanah, 2018)

Integration of practical training experiences into the academic curriculum is one of the ways to achieve the desired outcome of quality education. Service-learning can fulfil this aim. Service-learning encourages students to be creative when applying their knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to resolve issues and challenges encountered in the community (Yusof et.al., 2020). In 2019, the MOHE has devised a set of national guidelines on service-learning implementation in Malaysian universities, which is known as 'SULAM' (Department of Higher Education, 2019).

Service-learning is also included in the curriculum at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Being an accounting school UUM, TISSA-UUM has implemented a service-learning project in the Management Accounting course. Since 2018, the course has included a service-learning project. The project requires students to identify any existing business and assist it with financial planning, such as budgeting, target sales and profit, and customer focus. In order to do so, students must apply and develop financial planning skills in the business. Students are expected to be able to apply all of the costing techniques covered in the prerequisite course to a service-learning project. Students are expected to understand and apply decision-making techniques related to profit planning in daily business processes by the end of the project.

However, no research on how service-learning projects could improve education quality, particularly in accounting education, has been conducted since. An overview of previous studies on service-learning suggests that the effects of service-learning implementation are currently limited, as most studies focused on measuring the effectiveness and learning outcomes of service-learning. Given the novelty of this practise in the Malaysian context, understanding the mechanics of its implementation in terms of the challenges and opportunities encountered by both lecturers and students is critical. Nonetheless, the literature on service-learning suggests that the key aspect of service-learning is the integration of community service into academic learning, whereby parallel

development and partnership between the community and the students occur in a natural ecosystem (Yusof et.al, 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of service-learning

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes (Najah Nadiyah Amran & Hamdi Ishak, 2017; Arandi, Sugeng Utaya & Budijanto 2016). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) underlines the importance of active learning to enhance students' soft skills, particularly critical-thinking skills (AACSB, 2013).

Bringle and Clayton (2012) conclude that service-learning is an educational approach combining academic knowledge acquisition with civic engagement. Service-learning falls into the category of teaching and learning methods as it emphasizes real experience and involvement in the field to meet the needs of the community and at the same time students apply the theory of knowledge gained in the course (Aliyu Deba, A., Jabor, M. K., Sukri Saud, M., & Buntat, Y. 2015).

According to Kaye and Connolly (2013), there are five stages of service-learning. Even though each stage is referenced separately, they are linked together and often experienced simultaneously. Please refer to Figure 1 below.

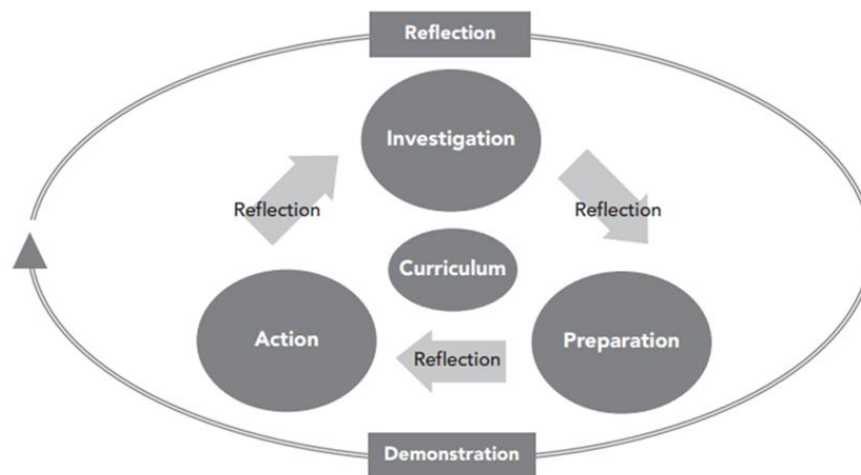


Fig. 1. Five Stages of Service-learning (Kaye & Connolly, 2013)

(i) Investigation:

Includes both the inventory of student interests, skills, and talents and the social analysis of the issue being addressed. This analysis requires gathering information about the identified need through action research that includes the use of varied approaches: media, interviews of experts, the survey of varied populations, and direct observation/personal experiences.

(ii) Preparation:

Includes the continued acquisition of knowledge that addresses any resultant questions from investigation along with academic content, identification of groups already working towards solutions, organization of a plan with clarification of roles, responsibilities and timelines, and ongoing development of any skills needed to successfully carry the plan to fruition.

(iii) Action:

Includes the implementation of the plan that usually takes the form of direct service, indirect service, advocacy, or research. Action is always planned with mutual agreement and respect with partners so these builds understanding and perspective of issues and how other people live.

(iv) Reflection:

Reflection is the connector between each stage of service and summative. Through reflection, students consider their thoughts and feelings (cognition and affect) regarding any overarching essential question or inquiry that is a driving force of the total experience. Reflection informs how the process develops, increases self-awareness, assists in developing the future, and employs varied multiple intelligences.

(v) Demonstration:

Student demonstration captures or contains the totality of the experience including what has been learned, the process of the learning, and the service or contribution accomplished. Beginning with the investigation, students document all parts of the process, resulting in a complete and comprehensive ability to tell the story of what took place during each stage that includes key informative reflection. Students draw upon their skills and talents in the manner of demonstration, often integrating technology.

2.2 Benefits of service-learning

The implementation of service-learning has brought numerous benefits to students. For example, there seems to be a positive change in students' attitudes and behavior toward learning after their involvement in service-learning (Chai, 2013; Gerholz, Liszt & Klingsieck, 2020). In addition, service-learning has increased students' involvement and awareness of civic engagement (Chai 2013; Sanders et al. 2016; Miftachul Huda et. al 2020; Gerholz, Liszt & Klingsieck 2020). A previous study by Gerholz, Liszt & Klingsieck (2018) shows that service-learning has an impact on the cognitive and personal development of students. The students perceived themselves as more self-efficacious and realized that their capabilities can make a valuable contribution to society.

Other studies identified a greater impact on students' social skills, particularly communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills (Chai 2013; Gerholz, Liszt & Klingsieck 2020). Service-learning also managed to facilitate students' academic achievement (Jackson et al. 2020). Black (2002) identified additional benefits of service-learning which include the development of self-esteem, personal efficacy and sense of responsibility, ethical/moral values, willingness to take risks and accept new challenges, higher critical thinking and decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

The aim of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' (AICPA) core competencies is to increase students' skill sets in meeting the needs of the profession. A service-learning project conducted by Edmond & Driskill (2019) shows that their goals of instilling the AICPA's core competencies and increasing the soft skills of the students were achieved, some of the skills and benefits developed or enhanced as a result of a service-learning project are teamwork, humility, selflessness, collaboration, leadership, unity, participation, approachability, budgeting, networking and communication skills (Edmond & Driskill, 2019).

A study by Maharam, Najah Nadiyah, Zainab, Maznah, Hamdi and Suria (2019) on the practice and implementation of service-learning in four public universities in Malaysia reveals various methods of implementation of service-learning have been practiced by public universities in Malaysia, such as learning through involvement in volunteer activities, problem-based learning, project-based learning, community case study, discipline-based project and Capstone Project. It is proven that service-learning has a positive impact on students' soft skills, value, and ethics and increase the students' experience and knowledge of the community. These impacts also benefited the educators, the university as well as community (Maharam, Najah Nadiyah, Zainab, Maznah, Hamdi & Suria, 2019).

After implementing service-learning for several years in auditing and governmental/nonprofit course, Still and Clayton (2004) concluded that service-learning is an important part of the accounting curriculum in their university. Students not only have the opportunity to gain valuable work experience but also have a chance to network with others in a professional setting. The utilization of service-learning in accounting programme has proven that service-learning has increased the students' understanding of the workings of different business environments such as non-profit organizations.

Besides auditing and non-profit course, service-learning has been introduced in Managerial Accounting courses. A study on a service-learning project developed in a Managerial Accounting course received positive feedback from the student (Lafond, Leaby & Wentzel, 2017). Apart from being able to enhance their understanding of cost-volume-profit analysis, the service-learning project has allowed them to connect with the community, especially with the less fortunate (Lafond, Leaby & Wentzel, 2017).

2.3 Sustainable development goals (SDGs)

The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, actionable through the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is a new, universal set of goals, targets, and indicators that United Nation member states will be expected to use to frame their agenda and political policies over the next 15 years (2016 – 2030). SDG consists of 17 Goals, 169 Targets and more than 200 Indicators that cover 5 dimensions namely People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership (UN, 2015). The list of 17 SDGs are SDG 1: No Poverty; SDG 2: Zero Hunger; SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being; SDG 4: Quality Education; SDG 5: Gender Equality; SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy; SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; SDG 10: Reduced Inequality; SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities; SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production; SDG 13: Climate Action; SDG 14: Life Below Water; SDG 15: Life on Land; SDG 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions, and; SDG 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal.

In this study, the focus is on SDG 4: Quality of Education. The aims of SDG 4 are to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. SDG 4 is made up of 10 targets: free primary and secondary education; equal access to quality pre-primary education; affordable technical, vocational and higher education; increased number of people with relevant skills for financial success; elimination of all discrimination in education; universal literacy and numeracy; and education for sustainable development and global citizenship, build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools; expand higher education scholarships for developing countries; and increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries.

More specifically SDG 4, Target 4.3, focuses on higher education and explicitly indicates that by 2030, countries across the world should ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university (<https://sdgcompass.org/sdgs/sdg-4/>). Such a target seeks to ensure that education at the higher education level is not only provided but is accessible and of the highest quality to both men and women. Therefore, combining the three aspects of sustainable development in higher education, teaching and learning should lead to quality outcomes. This situation shows the important role of higher education institutions, through their experience in teaching and learning for all levels of education, i.e. undergraduate, postgraduate, professional and executive training (Ferguson and Roofee, 2020). The higher education institutions' capacity-building and training are important in enhancing the capabilities of educators for the delivery of quality and inclusive curricula and the utilization of inclusive pedagogy.

3. CONCLUSION

The result of this study is expected to serve as guidance to lecturers, students, and schools to conduct service-learning activities in the best way to achieve the target of quality education. This study may heighten the awareness of lecturers in identifying the learning tasks that are well-developed as well as the least. This may further be a motivating factor to adopt measures and new strategies for the improvement of students' skills. The explanation of expected findings with reference to the Malaysian higher learning institution context is expected to be unique, thus, offering a novel understanding of service-learning activities by Malaysian higher learning institutions.

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