Achieving Quality Education Through Service-Learning Approach

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation and impact of service-learning within the context of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes quality education and holistic development. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) has incorporated service-learning into its curriculum, particularly within the TISSA-UUM's Management Accounting course. Since 2018, students have been required to engage with local businesses or non-profit organizations to apply financial planning and budgeting techniques learned in class to real-world situations. Despite the potential benefits, research on the specific impact of service-learning on accounting education at TISSA-UUM remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining students' learning experiences during service-learning projects. The study used experimental approach involved three teaching groups of Management Accounting II. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes related to students' learning experiences: personal development, venturing beyond comfort zones, and gaining real-life experiences. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for lecturers, students, and educational institutions on how to effectively conduct service-learning activities to achieve the goals of quality education outlined in SDG 4. By understanding both the benefits and challenges of service-learning, educational stakeholders can better prepare students for successful integration into professional environments, ultimately contributing to their personal and professional growth.

Keywords: Service-learning; Accounting education; Management Accounting; SDG4.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an inter-governmental 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 achieve Sustainable Development Goals (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 the other SDGs in on one way or another.

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 centre (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 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 use of the Critical Occupations List to identify and address skills shortages (Khazanah, 2018).

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Integration of practical training experiences into academic curriculum is one of the ways to achieve the desired outcome of a 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 Service-learning Malaysia – University for Society or SULAM. (Department of Higher Education, 2019).

Universiti Utara Malaysia is also offering service-learning in the curriculum. Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz School of Accountancy (TISSA-UUM), as one of the schools in UUM, has implemented service-learning project in Management Accounting course. The service-learning project was introduced in the course since 2018. The project requires students to identify any existing business, either small business enterprise or not-for profit organization, and help the business in term of financial planning, e.g. budgeting process, target sales and target profit, and customer centred. In doing this, the students need to apply and develop skills related to financial planning on the business. It is expected that students should be able to apply all the costing techniques covered during the pre-requisite course into service-learning project. At the end of the project, students are expected to understand and apply the techniques of decision making related to profit planning in daily business process.

However, research on how service-learning project could enhance students' learning skills specifically in accounting education at TISSA-UUM is has not been conducted ever since. The overview of the various past studies conducted on service-learning suggests that the effects of the implementation of service-learning is currently limited as most investigations were focused on measuring the effectiveness and learning outcomes of service-learning. Given the novelty of this practice in the Malaysian context, it is crucial to understand the mechanics of its implementation with regards to the challenges and opportunities encountered both by lecturers and students. Nevertheless, the literature on service-learning, both within Malaysia and abroad, suggests that the key aspect of service-learning comprises 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)

Thus, this research is carried out to examine the students' learning experiences from the implementation of service-learning in class. In other words, the question that this study aim to solved is "How effective is the implementation of service-learning in the effort to enhance students' learning experience?"

The result of this study is expected to serve as a guidance to lecturers, students, and school to conduct service-learning activity in a best way to achieve the target of quality education. As mentioned by Yusof et.al (2020), it is important to consider both lecturers' and students' perspectives in the attempt to understand the ways to conduct successful service-learning projects that would allow students to fully reap the benefits from such experiential learning. Participation in service-learning can help build leadership skills among students. When conducted correctly, students become more confident and prouder of their contributions toward the community that they served (Barnett, Jeandron & Patton, 2009). However, students must be supported and guided from their early years in the university to prepare them for the challenges they may face during the service-learning implementation.

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 Nadiah 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. The stages are investigation, preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. Even though each stage is referenced separately, they are linked together and often experienced simultaneously, as shown in Figure 1 below:
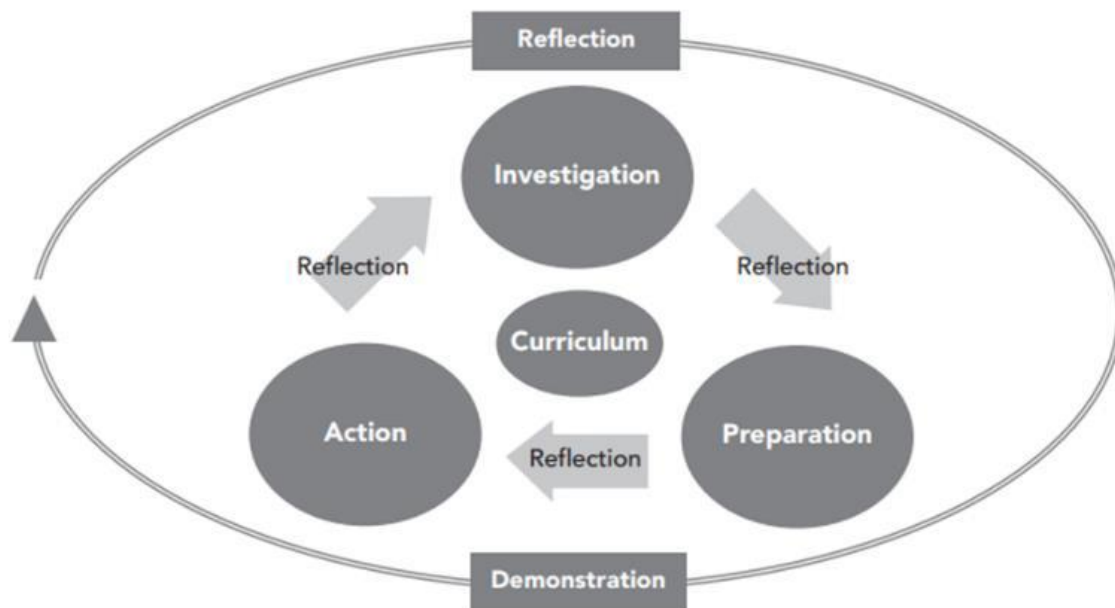

Figure 1: Stages in Service-learning
Source: Kaye, C. B., & Connolly, M. (2013).

2.2 Benefits of service-learning

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

Other studies identified 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' skillsets 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, approachable, budgeting, networking and communication skills (Edmond & Driskill, 2019).

A study by Maharam, Najah Nadiah, Zainab, Maznah, Hamdi and Suria (2019) on 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 proven that service-learning has a positive impact on students' soft skills, ethics and increase

the students' experience and knowledge on the community. These impacts also benefited the educators, university as well as community (Maharam, Najah Nadiah, 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 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 program have proven that service-learning has increase the students' understanding of 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 service-learning project developed in Managerial Accounting course received positive feedback from student (Lafond, Leauby & Wentzel, 2017). Apart from being able to enhance their understanding on cost-volume-profit analysis, the service-learning project has given them the opportunity to connect with community especially with the less fortunate (Lafond, Leauby & Wentzel, 2017).

2.3   Outcomes of service-learning

Service-learning promotes not only academic and cognitive growth but also enhances civic engagement, social responsibility, and personal development among students. This section discusses the outcomes of service-learning among others include personal development, civic engagement and social responsibility, and community impacts.

2.3.1 Personal and Social Development

Service-learning programs form the value of confidence in students when they involve themselves in the program. Undergraduate students who are exposed to service-learning will be more confident in themselves to interact with various parties as well as more confident in their own abilities in implementing projects involving the community. In addition, the experience of implementing also helps improve students' competence in the field they are engaged in. Service-learning also fosters the value of teamwork where students are able to work together in a group in carrying out tasks hand in hand to achieve the team's goals and can eliminate individualistic attitudes. Leadership values also develop several other skills needed as an effective leader such as time management, tolerance, listening skills, problem solving, financial management and so on (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2020).

Recent research by Mtawa, Fongwa and Wilson-Strydom (2021) highlights the transformative impact of service-learning on students' personal and social development. Service-learning experiences provide opportunities for students to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering the development of critical thinking, communication skills and teamwork. They argue that service-learning has the potential to enhance graduate employability skills while fostering human capacities. Through collaborative teamwork and problem-solving, students enhance their communication abilities and leadership potential (Moely & Vincent, 2014). Furthermore, service-learning often challenges students to step outside their comfort zones and develop skills like creative problem-solving skills, relationship and team skills, self-reflection skills and critical thinking skills (Snell & Lau, 2020). By navigating real-world complexities and uncertainties, students develop a greater sense of confidence and adaptability, essential traits for success in both personal and professional spheres.

2.3.2 Civic engagement and social responsibility

Service-learning is beneficial in terms of students' civic engagement where they will be more called to be involved in activities to reform and improve the quality of life of a community. Students will be more aware of the responsibility they can play in the development of a community. Students play a big role in bringing change for the better in the community (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2020).

The study conducted by Coelho and Menezes (2021) provides compelling evidence of the positive impact of on students' sense of civic responsibility and community engagement. Through meaningful interactions with community members and organizations, students develop a deeper understanding of social issues and their role as active citizens. Service-learning experiences foster empathy and compassion, motivating students to address societal challenges and advocate for social change. Moreover, service-learning initiatives often incorporate reflection activities that encourage students to critically examine their own values and beliefs, further contributing to their development as socially responsible individuals (Resch and Schrittesser, 2023). Thus, service-learning emerges as a powerful tool for nurturing a generation of civic-minded leaders committed to making a positive difference in their communities.

2.3.3   Community Impact

Service-learning increases student insights of the importance of community work, understanding of diversity, social skills as well as a sense of responsibility. The activities help students to become socially sound, educate and train other members of the community, who work in some way to develop the society and improve the environment and living conditions of the society (Afzal & Hussain,2020). Service-learning offered practical benefits to communities. Chika-James, Salem & Oyet (2022) indicated three broad benefits toward their organizations that were commonly shared by participants included (a) the added knowledge and opportunities to improve people management, marketing of services and products, and overall business operations, (b) financial resources and (c) valuable time saved. Thus, by fostering mutually beneficial relationships, service-learning initiatives can create lasting impacts on both students and the communities they serve.

3.   METHODOLOGY

This research employs experimental approach (Eriksson, Johansson, Kettaneh-Wold, Wikström, & Wold, 2000; Kirk, 1982). The participants in this research are the students from TISSA-UUM taking Management Accounting II course in the Second Semester 2022/2023. There are 3 teaching groups involved. Each teaching group consists of 40-45 students. Students in each teaching group are required to form small group consist of 6-7 members. There were about 6-7 small groups in one class. Each small groups must then identify an existing business and help the business in term of financial planning, e.g., budgeting process, target sales and target profit, and customer centred.

Before implementing the service-learning approach, an initial open-ended interview was administered prior to the experimental treatment. During this stage, the question is more on the preparation of students and on the prior knowledge on service-learning. Example of the question asked was, "What is your preparation to start the service-learning project?". Another set of open-ended interviews were administered immediately at the end of the experimental treatment to gather the data on the reflections from the students on the experimentation, providing overall perceptions of the service-learning project used in the teaching and learning process. Example of question asked was, "What are the skills that you gained by doing service-learning activities?"

The researcher selects the leader of each small groups to be the interviewee. This is the open-ended interview session where the participants are free to share their experiences during the implementation of service-learning project. As a leader, they are expected to master the whole process of the project. Since the selection of leader, the researcher keeps on reminding the leader that they must be responsible on all process, as well as the team members.

During the implementation of service-learning project, researcher did the observation on how students conduct the process. Researcher observed on the methods and the actions done by students in gathering data from selected business and observe the way students interpret the result via discussion in class. Further, students are required to submit a project diary which provide in depth records of the actions taken during the process of conducting service-learning project.

The qualitative data collected from these data collection procedure was coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Patton, 2002), which involves assigning each unit of data its own unique code and identifying repetitive patterns of actions and consistencies. Data coding was performed to identify the themes and categories of qualitative data. Data coding is a cyclical process, where usually several cycles of coding processes are needed for a good coding result, and the cycles of coding processes.

4.   DISCUSSION

Service-learning offers an educational model that links valuable community service experiences with academic coursework, helping students prepare for community integration (Novak et al., 2007). The aim is to foster a closer connection between the university and the community, rather than seeing the university as an isolated ivory tower. Service-learning is thus perceived as a more comprehensive and holistic approach to educational opportunities.

The results of this study provide evidence that students improve academic understanding of subject matter, and skills learned through service-learning activities, and ability to apply knowledge with social issues. The results also indicate that service-learning consistently provides improvement in the skills required by the graduates nowadays as highlighted in SDG 4. Engaging with diverse communities pushes students to be adaptable and flexible, honing their problem-solving skills as they encounter real-world issues without clearcut solutions.

A study by Ibrahim and Hassan (2020) found that students who had been involved in service-learning benefited in terms of academic achievement. Among the benefits obtained by students is understanding, interest and high-level thinking skills. Service-learning brings students closer to course content through the application of theory and knowledge learned in lectures to the real world. This provides a new learning experience to students and their understanding of the course taken also increases.

The study also demonstrates that leadership and teamwork are crucial elements of these projects, allowing students to enhance their decision-making skills, delegate tasks, and work collaboratively. Additionally, exposure to diverse cultures and socioeconomic background enhances their cultural competence and empathy, better equipping them for professional environments. It is supported by the meta-analysis study by Yorio & Ye (2012), in which they revealed consistent improvements in students' academic performance across various disciplines. According to them, service-learning not only has a positive effect on understanding of social issues but also on personal insight and cognitive development. This finding supports the notion that service-learning enhances students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts, thereby deepening their understanding of course material.

A study by Choi, Han and Kim (2023) demonstrated that students' learning process and reflection were promoted by seven critical experiences: (a) understanding and providing benefits that recipients really need, (b) designing and planning a project by themselves, (c) solving a real-world problem, (d) collaborating with diverse people, (e) undertaking a specific role of responsibility, (f) recognizing and managing uncomfortable feelings, and (g) reflecting on their interest and abilities. Additionally, this study revealed that students had expanded their learning and reflection of their service-learning experiences into multidimensional learning contexts by (a) connecting with formal academic courses and (b) engaging in new on- and offcampus activities. Thus, service-learning projects solidifies students' understanding of accounting concepts and demonstrates their relevance. Further, it develops essential professional skills, such as financial analysis and tax preparation, while offering networking opportunities with community organizations and professionals, which can lead to mentorship and job prospects (Conway & Amel, 2019). This real-world engagement allows students to explore various career paths within accounting, making informed decisions about their futures.

Ultimately, the satisfaction derived from making a positive impact on the community reinforces their commitment to the profession and ethical practices. Thus, service-learning provides a comprehensive, transformative experience that equips students with the skills needed for personal and professional success in the field of accounting. However, the findings of the study show students engaging in service-learning activities often encounter significant obstacles such as limited cooperation from companies, which may not prioritize or have the resources for student involvement, and stringent confidentiality issues that restrict access to sensitive information crucial for their projects.

Balancing academic responsibilities with service-learning commitments can lead to time management challenges, while inadequate preparation and training can leave students feeling unprepared to handle practical tasks and real-world problems. As mentioned by Novak et.al (2007), service-learning faces the challenge of any educational practice, the difference between simply adopting a label for some practice and the effort in defining the standards and practices for optimal or even minimal outcomes.

Additionally, logistical issues like transportation difficulties and communication barriers with community partners further complicate their efforts. These challenges are compounded by the emotional and psychological strain of dealing with distressing situations and the pressure to perform effectively, all of which require robust support and preparation from academic institutions to mitigate. Addressing these obstacles involves clear communication of benefits, providing support and resources, building trust, and implementing strong confidentiality protocols and training for students. Overcoming these challenges is essential to maximize the benefits of service-learning for all parties involved. Addressing these confidentiality issues requires establishing strong partnerships between academic institutions and companies. This includes developing clear confidentiality agreements, providing necessary training for students, and implementing stringent data protection protocols. By fostering trust and demonstrating a commitment to ethical practices, academic institutions can alleviate companies' concerns and enhance the effectiveness of service-learning activities.

5. CONCLUSION

Service-learning emerges as a potent educational model that integrates community service with academic coursework, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and realworld application. This study highlights the

benefits of service-learning, which not only enhances students' academic understanding but also equips them with essential skills required for modern professional environments. The research findings demonstrate that students engaging in service-learning activities experience significant improvements in their academic performance and personal development. The practical application of classroom knowledge to community issues fosters deeper comprehension of subject matter and cultivates critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making abilities. This aligns with the SDG 4, emphasizing the importance of quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.

Moreover, service-learning enhances cultural competence and empathy, as students interact with diverse communities and navigate complex social issues. The development of leadership and teamwork skills further prepares students for collaborative professional settings. Studies by Yorio & Ye (2012) and Choi, Han, and Kim (2023) support these findings, illustrating consistent improvements in academic performance and cognitive development through service-learning experiences.

However, the implementation of service-learning programs is not without challenges. Students often face obstacles such as limited cooperation from companies, confidentiality issues, and logistical difficulties. Effective solutions include clear communication of benefits, robust support systems, strong confidentiality protocols, and comprehensive training for students. By addressing these challenges, academic institutions can enhance the effectiveness of service-learning activities.

Ultimately, service-learning offers a transformative educational experience that prepares students for personal and professional success. By fostering a closer connection between universities and communities, service-learning not only benefits students but also contributes to the betterment of society. As institutions continue to refine and support these programs, the potential for positive impact on both students and communities will continue to grow.

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