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ADVANCING UNDERSTANDING OF SERVICE-LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to advance the understanding of service-learning within the context of Malaysian higher education, employing multiple qualitative approaches to source information relating to student perspectives whilst critically analysing findings through triangulation. The study explores how service-learning is conceptualized, experienced, and implemented from the viewpoints of university students through focus group interviews, complemented by a systematic examination of institutional documents related to service-learning programmes and policies, and observations of service-learning events.

Methodology – The research utilized an exploratory-triangulation design, blending focus group interviews with document analysis and observations to gather comprehensive data. Data was collected through a primary source, involving focus group interviews with 15 students across five groups. The data were triangulated through a document analysis of three course syllabi, 10 faculty websites, 72 news articles, 112 university news publications, three university reports, and the observations from six service-learning events. Data collected from the focus group interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, while those collected using document analysis and observations were used for the purpose of triangulation.

Findings – Three themes were constructed relating to the students' perspectives towards service-learning and they comprised the following: (1) experiential learning activities; (2) academic course; and (3) serving the community. There were a total of 14 sub-themes. It was found that students perceived service-learning as an effective experiential learning tool, combining academic learning with

community service, though its adoption is not extensive across the campus, highlighting a need for broader implementation in the curriculum.

Significance – It addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by offering insights into the perspectives of students in a non-Western context, particularly the context in Malaysia. In addition, this study provides a nuanced understanding of service-learning in a non-Western context, thus offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and practitioners aiming to optimize service-learning practices and align them more closely with student needs and institutional goals. The findings inform a comprehensive strategy for the design and execution of service-learning as an educational approach in higher education.

Keywords: Community engagement, experiential learning, intercoder reliability, service-learning, student perspective, university students.

INTRODUCTION

Universities today can be seen partnering and interacting actively with community members via various collaborations that result in the collaborative development of knowledge and reciprocally positive outcomes that are deemed viable and constructive (Mbah, 2018). In fact, universities are regarded as one of the key players in serving the people locally, nationally, and globally (Watermeyer, 2011). Community engagement is known as a vital element in designing resolutions that are locally exclusive to a particular community (Baltzell et al., 2019). By adopting the concept of community engagement within a higher education institution, community needs can be met through an extensive series of efforts such as “service-learning”, “civic education”, “community-based leadership” and “university-community partnerships” (Farish, 2014).

Among the types of community engagement mentioned, service-learning seems to be the most widely adopted by universities worldwide. Since there is a rising number of higher education institutions working to develop stronger ties between them and the community, it is essential to acknowledge the impact of service-learning in such attempts (Boerngen et al., 2018). Service-learning refers to a pedagogical approach that constructs knowledge from experience whilst creating common good in the society (Block & Bartkus, 2019). For a university to be considered as an engaged university, service-learning must therefore, be considered (Whiteford & Strom, 2013).

In line with service as one of the primary missions of universities, other than teaching and research (Soska et al., 2010; Wade & Demb, 2009), service-learning as a field of study has received considerable attention from researchers and developed rapidly in the past few decades (Waters & Anderson-Lain, 2014). Such a development is also due to service-learning being highly recommended considering its philosophy and method (Jia et al., 2018; Vickers et al., 2004). It also makes sense of the connection between classroom learning and service to the community (Wade & Demb, 2009).

Service-learning is an educational method used in numerous fields at various levels, including higher education, in which it is also known as community-based learning (Bui & Nguyen, 2021). Over the years, this pedagogical method has demonstrated its significant impacts on academic and social domains among the students (Boerngen et al., 2018; Bui & Nguyen, 2021; Gardner & Emory, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2022; Naseem et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023). As the term implies, service-learning is an educational method that promotes the act of serving in learning among students. Students are

concurrently taught to serve to learn, and to learn to serve through service-learning to meet the community partners' needs. It can therefore, be said that service-learning is a pedagogical approach that promotes experiential learning among students, whereby they are required to apply their academic knowledge in meeting community needs.

Through service-learning, a stronger sense of public participation is developed when students are required to address the community needs and work towards meeting those needs (Nielsen, 2016). As a result, students' sense of accountability towards their own learning and assignments is enhanced. Service-learning has been proven as an effective pedagogical tool but its implementation as courses in universities is hindered by the perception that it is unnecessary (Thuwayba et al., 2013). Bui and Nguyen's study (2021) shows that students' indifference and their limited knowledge concerning the approach tend to impede the execution of service-learning. Furthermore, it has been reported that students' understandings of the advantages of service-learning practices remain vague even though this pedagogical approach is widely commended in academia (Gonzales et al., 2022).

Previous studies in service-learning were mostly carried out in western contexts (Culcasia & Venegas, 2023) and focused heavily on students' developmental outcomes that resulted from the service-learning experience (Li et al., 2016; Myers, 2020). In Malaysia, the number of studies pertaining to students' perspectives towards service-learning as a pedagogical approach, particularly its outcomes, is meagre (Ahmad et al., 2014; Hamdan et al., 2015; Shanti, 2012). For instance, Salam et al., (2017) investigated students' viewpoints on the pedagogical approach in support of skills development and academic learning, whilst Siti Zahirah et al., (2015) assessed students' intention towards their participation in service-learning.

Studies were also found emphasizing challenges of service-learning implementation from both the university's and students' viewpoints (Nurul Ashikin et al., 2021; Yusof et al., 2020), and Yusof et al. (2020) remarked that there was a gap between the theory and practice of service-learning, particularly among students. Although there are numerous studies on the impacts of service-learning on students, research concerning students' perspectives towards this pedagogical approach is largely absent. This poses a problem because if students' knowledge of service-learning is uncertain, their learning process might be hindered. Hence, Malaysian students' perspectives towards service-learning remains a critical gap that the present study intends to fill.

Building on existing knowledge about service-learning and its impacts, this study seeks to examine students' perspectives towards this pedagogical approach at one of the private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Additionally, recognizing the limited research on this topic in the Malaysian context, the study aims to fill this gap by examining how these insights align with the actual implementation and effectiveness of service-learning programmes. The overarching objective of this case study has emphasized the practice of service-learning at the selected institution and revolves around the pedagogical approach and the students' experience in the service-learning projects. Ultimately, the study seeks to identify gaps and opportunities for the integration of service-learning into the curriculum, thereby contributing to the development of more effective educational strategies that are responsive to student needs and institutional goals.

Since service-learning was prescribed to improve the quality of graduates in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2019), the Ministry of Education (MOE), Malaysia has established the Service Learning Malaysia University for Society (SULAM) in 2019 to promote and help design at least one course to be offered in all undergraduate programmes. Therefore, this present investigation is vital for tailoring

service-learning to non-western contexts, to ensure that it effectively meets the unique educational needs and cultural dynamics of Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service-learning

There is no particular interpretation of the term service-learning, with it being explained differently through 77 definitions and categorized into three groups, namely experiential learning, philosophy of education and reciprocity-based learning (Bui & Nguyen, 2021; Culcasia & Venegas, 2023). According to Myers (2020), service-learning being a type of experiential learning, engages students in real-life experiences that link to their curriculum learning purposes, whereby these experiences commonly involve not-for-profit community organizations that result in mutual benefits. This definition is supported by Pak (2020), who defines service-learning as a form of experiential learning that “combines collaboration, knowledge, and action to improve community life and foster civic engagement. A well-designed SL programme engages students in meaningful community service and critical reflection that promote learning beyond the disciplinary boundaries” (Pak, 2020, p. 67).

As the literature suggests, the explanation of service-learning as experiential learning is considered to be the most common definition offered in service-learning studies (Culcasia & Venegas, 2023). Based on this understanding, a study conducted by Jia et al. (2018) reveals that the nature of service-learning programmes is favored by teacher trainees from teacher education since they could apply their knowledge and skills to solve real-life issues whilst discovering resources and ideas applicable to their teaching content in their subject fields.

Similarly, positive responses are obtained from both students and instructors in terms of the students' learning skills, personal development and social consciousness after their participation in the service-learning project (Bui & Nguyen, 2021). This pedagogical approach promotes students' creativity in applying what they have learned on campus in solving problems and challenges faced by the community members under the guidance of their instructors (Yusof et al., 2020). Hence, it can be concluded that service-learning offers students the avenue to engage members of the community to resolve real-world problems through experiential learning.

The Importance of University Students' Perspectives Towards Service-learning

Numerous studies have been conducted concerning the advantages of service-learning as a pedagogical approach in higher education, particularly with regard to academic outcomes. While it is crucial to examine students' perspectives on service-learning, the literature shows that very little research has been done on this particular aspect (Chan et al., 2021; Naseem et al., 2022). As perceived service-learning advantages among students tend to promote the development of the activities (Gonzales et al., 2022), it is imperative that studies pertaining to the students' perspectives on this teaching approach be considered. Moreover, a greater understanding of students' views of service-learning is vital for planning and executing service-learning activities that will benefit the students (Chan et al., 2021). Besides that, examining students' viewpoints on service-learning curricula is essential in order to examine how this pedagogical approach assists students' learning in both academic and skills development (Salam et al., 2017).

According to Chan et al., (2021), students' viewpoints of service-learning tend to change radically throughout their involvement and hence, it is not permanent. In fact, the majority of the students was reported to have favorable perspectives towards service-learning after finishing the curriculum, and even those who claimed to have undesirable views or refused to participate in the beginning, showed a positive change (Chan et al., 2021). A similar observation was also made by Ribeiro et al. (2023), which found that students perceived the service-learning experience as influential in their attitude and behavioral change. In addition, student recognition of service-learning support seemed to be an important component among students in their academic learning and skills development (Salam et al., 2017). Therefore, university students' perspectives towards service-learning are undeniably significant to ensure the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach.

Expectancy-value Theory

Grounded within the expectancy-value theory, this research affirms that expectancy and value are the key aspects determining students' participation in service-learning and eventually their learning performance. As asserted by Eccles et al. (1983), expectancy describes students' beliefs in their knowledge and skills in carrying out a task and their awareness that they are accountable for their personal academic achievement, while value refers to their beliefs in their discerned significance of the task and their interests in it.

In other words, when students believe that they have the ability to carry out the task (expectancy aspect) which they deem significant and exciting (value aspect), there is a likelihood that they will persevere with the process and therefore, achieve positive learning outcomes (Lo et al., 2022). Similarly, it is presumed that students are more likely to participate in service-learning programmes if they believe that service projects can enhance their learning experience (Li et al., 2016). Therefore, in line with the expectancy-value theory, this research has posited that students' beliefs in the importance of service-learning could promote their involvement in service projects.

The Present Study

This study took place at one of the private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. This institution is listed under the Malaysian Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996, a not-for-profit private university sustained through students' tuition fees and public donations. The student population of this institution was estimated (at the time of this study) to have more than 22,000 students across two campuses located in two different states in the country. At present, there are over 121 academic programmes ranging from foundation studies to undergraduate and postgraduate studies focusing on more than 10 different disciplines. The university has three centers, nine faculties and three institutes on two campuses.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present study adopted the exploratory-triangulation design, focusing on focus group interviews as the primary method combined with document analysis and observations. Triangulation was carried out in order to establish the credibility and validity of the study. Triangulation could corroborate the findings from the various data sources informing the current study as the inadequacies of the primary method of data collection are overcome by the strengths offered by other approaches (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Meanwhile, the exploratory design was deemed suitable in the context of the present

study because the instruments and measures for the study were not available, the variables were unknown, and no guiding theory or framework was available to support the study (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

The data collection process started with focus group interviews (core component) that involved students across the institution targeted. Focus group interview was employed considering its suitability and effectiveness in addressing the research topic. In validating the findings generated, document analysis and observation (supplementary components) were carried out to triangulate the findings obtained from the focus group interviews. These supplementary components were deemed crucial and ought to be continued until the researcher was convinced that the analysis concerning that component's sub-question was answered (Morse, 2010). Besides that, a richer and more comprehensive knowledge regarding the students' perspectives towards service-learning were also sourced by employing multiple techniques in gathering the data. During the data collection process, a journal was maintained in which the researchers' thoughts, expectations and assumptions were documented and recorded accordingly.

Data Collection

Stage 1: Focus Group Interviews

Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition of service-learning served as the main guideline in establishing the criteria for selection of the focus group participants, and they included the following:

- The service-learning project(s) must be course-based and credit-bearing.
- Participants must have previously taken part in community-engaged activity.
- The community-engaged activity must be targeted at meeting the community needs.
- The community-engaged activity must be related to the course content.
- The community-engaged activity must involve external stakeholders.

Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were employed to collect data from students who had previously participated in service-learning projects. By employing the snowball sampling technique, the focus group participants were identified through the recommendation of the initial eligible participant(s). In the current study, one eligible participant who has met the criteria for the selection was first identified. After the participant had expressed an interest in participating in the study, the participant was then asked to recommend other participants who met the same criteria. Such a referral process continued in a snowball-like pattern until data saturation was reached.

The focus group interview questions were developed using Castillo-Montoya's (2016) interview protocol refinement (IPR) method to explore participants' service-learning experiences in relation to the research objective. Everyday language was used and jargons were avoided in the process to ensure that the questions could be easily understood. The protocol was also refined by seeking feedback from experienced researchers and volunteers with similar backgrounds to the potential participants. A pilot study was then conducted to test the interview process, allowing the researchers to calculate duration, assess question effectiveness, and practice moderation skills. Throughout the process, adjustments were made to improve the clarity and relevance of the interview questions. The final step involved comparing the initial pilot study questions with the revised version used for actual data collection, ensuring a well-refined interview protocol.

Overall, five focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 15 students recruited from four different programmes (See Table 1). The focus group interviews were carried out from March to April of 2023. More than 30 percent of the participants were male and the remaining was female; all of them were full-time students of the institution.

Table 1

Demographic Details of Focus Group Participants

Focus Group	Major	Course	Gender
1	Communication	Corporate Social Responsibility	1 Male 2 Female
	Finance	Community Project	2 Male 1 Female
3	Communication	Corporate Social Responsibility	1 Male 2 Female
	Communication	Corporate Social Responsibility	1 Male 2 Female
5	Education Engineering	Community Project	3 Female

Stage 2: Document Analysis

The data collected through focus group interviews was triangulated using document analysis. This was carried out to improve its credibility and validity. The documents that were selected, reviewed and analyzed comprised course syllabi, web pages, newspaper articles, news publications and reports of the institution. Document analysis was used in the current study not only to validate the results of the focus group interviews but also to explore dimensions not covered in the interviews. The document selection criteria paralleled those outlined for selecting the focus group participants. For instance, the chosen documents should specify the students' service-learning experience within the institution, be course-based, credit-bearing and involve the community or external stakeholders, all of which are aligned to the research objective. The basic criteria for the selection of documents included the following:

- The service-learning project(s) was course-based and credit-bearing.
- Students were involved in the community-engaged activity.
- The community-engaged activity was targeted at meeting the community needs.
- The community-engaged activity was related to the course content.
- The community-engaged activity involved external stakeholders.

The documents were gathered and examined throughout the data processing phase. Meanwhile, self-journaling was carried out during the data collection in order to ensure that the researchers remain neutral. The documents gathered concerning the projects specified by the participants, along with the interview transcripts were regularly perused by an independent researcher (Coder B) to ensure that validity is maintained. In total, 200 documents were identified and analyzed; these documents were organized into categories such as "course syllabi", "faculties websites", "news articles", university news" and "university SDG reports" (See Table 2).

Table 2

Total Number of Documents Collected and Analyzed

Types of Documents	Quantity
Course Syllabi (CS)	3
Faculties Websites (FW)	10
News Articles (NA)	72
University News (UN)	112
UTAR SDG Reports (UR)	3

Stage 3: Observations

A non-participant observation methodology was employed in the last stage of the data collection process for triangulation purposes. Prior to observation, the criteria for selection of events that fit the study were outlined. The basic criteria for selection used in the focus group interviews and document analysis methods were adapted for the sake of consistency, with one adjustment being made – the selection of events observed was according to the findings yielded from the focus group interviews and document analysis. For instance, the researchers took into consideration the service-learning events mentioned and reported in focus group interviews and documents respectively. Other than that, the criteria for the selection of events observed were similar to those for the focus group interviews. They were as follows:

- The events observed must be service-learning projects that were course-based and credit-bearing. In other words, the events must be graded.
- The events observed must be related to the course content.
- The events observed must be organized by the students from the institution.
- The events observed must aim at serving the community and meeting the community needs.
- The events observed must involve external stakeholders.

As suggested by Kawulich (2005), the researchers took the following into account with regard to the observation: ethical concerns, building rapport, selection of events and its participants, observation procedures, decision on elements to be observed, writing of field notes, and producing the write-ups for the findings. Overall, the researchers attended six service-learning events which were organized by the students from the institution from March 2023 to April 2023. Over the course of this data collection phase, the researchers ensured that the aforementioned considerations were deliberated. Primarily, the events selected and attended by the researchers met the criteria for selection of events observed in the study.

At the beginning of any observational work, the researchers introduced themselves as an observer among the participants of the service-learning events. The purpose of the study was explained, along with any potential risks and benefits associated with the participants' participation. Next, permission was sought from all the participants verbally prior to the data collection (Morava et al., 2023). In terms of ethical considerations, the researchers acknowledged the importance of preserving the anonymity of the informants or participants in producing the manuscripts in the final stage of the research.

Overall, six service-learning events that were either executed on or off campus were observed (See Table 3). The events observed and recorded were informed by the findings generated from the focus group interviews in relation to the research objectives of the study.

Table 3

Details of Service-learning Events Selected and Observed

Types of Service-learning Events	Date	Time	Location
Environmental Activities	21st March 2023	4.00am – 4.00pm	Off-campus
Soft Launching Ceremony	31st March 2023	1.30pm – 4.00pm	On-campus
<i>Gotong-royong</i>	9th April 2023	7.00am – 11.00am	Off-campus
Mural Painting	15th April 2023	1.00pm – 4.30pm	Off-campus
Beach Cleaning	15th April 2023	4.30pm – 6.30pm	Off-campus
Grand Launching Ceremony and Charity Dinner	29th April 2023	1.30pm – 10.00pm	Off-campus

Data Analysis

Data collected from focus groups interviews, documents analysis and field notes written from the observations were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. Through this method, the connections and meanings within the categories studied were analysed to identify themes (Crowe et al., 2015). The themes created from the focus group interviews were corroborated through document analysis and observations using the coding technique (Table 4). The coding technique was used to analyze data by creating codes from the data sourced from the focus group interviews, document analysis and observations. The themes or categories that had to be identified in the data were determined by the researchers, whereby the coding framework was used as the foundation during the coding process and this had helped to categorize data systematically.

During the document analysis process, 200 documents were identified, in which these records contained diverse information about the research topic and they must be put into context in relation to the research objectives before the coding procedure could take place. Once all the relevant documents were compiled, a coding scheme was used to code the documents to ensure a precise representation of emergent ideas pertaining to the students' perspectives towards service-learning. This coding was based on the themes generated from the focus group interviews.

Meanwhile, field notes were used to record important details of the events observed during the observation process. Prior to the coding procedure, the field notes were shared with the participants involved for their verification in terms of its accuracy and validity of the overall process. The purpose of getting the participants to check on the field notes helped to eliminate bias and provide a more genuine account of the service-learning experience from the participants' points of view (Mulhall, 2003). Eventually, intercoder reliability was sought in refining the credibility and validity of the data analysis and the findings generated.

Table 4

Thematic Analysis Process

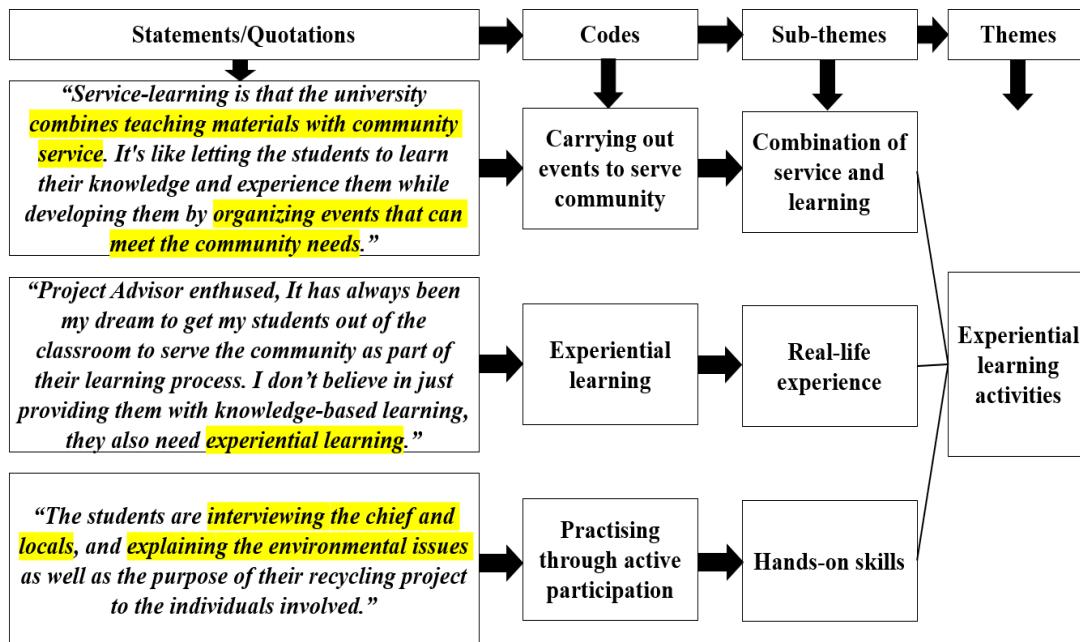


Table 5

Main Themes

No	Main Themes
1	Experiential learning activities
2	Academic course
3	Serving the community

Intercoder Reliability

In establishing intercoder reliability in a qualitative research, a minimum of two independent coders is required (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In fact, the necessity of having two independent coders is evidenced by the studies carried out in the past (Armadans-Tremolosa et al., 2021; Hennink et al., 2019; Kaur et al., 2023; Morava et al., 2023; Oudenampsen et al., 2023; Van Gaalen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, in the reality of many qualitative research projects, especially in early-career contexts, a single coder usually codes the majority of the data (Campbell et al., 2013). Under such circumstances, intercoder reliability can be attained by recruiting an additional person to code a sample of the data and once satisfactory reliability is obtained, the principal researcher will then continue to code the remaining data alone (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

In the current study, the coding process was completed by one of the researchers (Coder A) and an independent researcher (Coder B). Considering the need for intercoder reliability for the current study, Coder B was recruited in the coding process. To refine intercoder reliability, the double-coding process was carried out substantially and autonomously by the two coders (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Furthermore, the independent coder was an external individual who was not involved in the research

project, specifically in generating the initial codes at the preliminary stage (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). However, this independent coder was an experienced researcher trained in qualitative research. Considering the identity of this independent coder, ethical and data protection consideration was sought in terms of the implications concerning the dissemination of raw data to an external individual (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). A consent form was thus signed by the independent coder regarding the protection of privacy and confidentiality of the raw data received.

Grønkjær et al.'s (2011) constant comparative analysis technique that involves the independent coder in the coding process is adopted at this stage. In this technique, the coding process goes through three phases: (1) an open coding of all transcripts was carried out by the researcher who is Coder A in generating the initial codes, (2) An independent open coding is conducted by both coders in comparing the codes created before searching for themes, (3) clarifications, differences and uncertainties about the codes and themes are discussed between both coders.

During the coding process, the transcripts (focus group interviews) and records (document analysis and observations) were constantly condensed and recoded before the themes were finalized. All the codes and themes were then examined and deliberated collectively following the coding process. Ultimately, the codes and themes were decided and approved by the coders. Even though the procedures employed have been proven feasible based on the studies conducted in the past (Armadans-Tremolosa et al., 2021; Hennink et al., 2019; Kaur et al., 2023; Morava et al., 2023; Oudenampsen et al., 2023; Van Gaalen et al., 2021), intercoder reliability is nevertheless achieved using a statistical measure – Cohen's Kappa or percent agreement generated by NVivo 12 Pro. The coded transcripts completed by both coders were uploaded to the software for analysis and the kappa value generated was 0.5756.

RESULTS

Three main themes relating to the students' perspectives towards service-learning were constructed, and they were as follows: (1) experiential learning activities; (2) academic course; and (3) serving the community, with a total of 14 sub-themes. All the themes were derived from the primary method, that was the focus group interviews and the results were corroborated using document analysis and observations. During document analysis, most of the conclusions could be drawn from the themes generated through the focus group interviews. Meanwhile, observations were carried out in the final phase to furnish evidence for the themes identified at the earlier phases.

Experiential Learning Activities

Students describe service-learning as a learning experience that occurs outside the classroom, which they can experience psychologically and pragmatically. Furthermore, they claim that they are given the opportunities to participate in numerous activities that tackle real-life social issues through service-learning. They state that a course like corporate social responsibility allows them to study practically instead of theoretically. They share their understandings of service-learning as a type of experiential learning that blends academic knowledge with real-life community work. In fact, students perceive the pedagogical approach as an avenue to gain hands-on experience, whereby they can learn through functional involvement and acquire skills from events that focus on community needs. The students' feedback also emphasize the significance of the pragmatic learning prospect that is able to complement traditional classroom teaching. Most participants described service-learning as the following:

“What we learn in lectures and tutorials, textbooks and all the knowledge will be transformed into hands-on skills, events or real-life experience, which what we call and I understand it as service-learning.”

“Service-learning gives us the chance to gain the experience while learning. In service-learning, we plan activities to serve the people and we learn when we serve the people. It’s about gaining the experience.”

“Service-learning is that the university combines teaching materials with community service. It’s like letting the students to learn their knowledge and experience them while developing them by organizing events that can meet the community needs.”

Table 6

Thematic Map of Experiential Learning Activities

No	Sub-themes
1	Hands-on skills
2	Real-life experience
3	Combination of service and learning
4	Organizing activities and events

Academic Course

Students mentioned that the practice of service-learning on campus was carried out through two courses, namely the core course Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which was only offered to communication students majoring in public relations, and one of the university units or *Matapelajaran Pengajian Umum* (MPU) course Community Project. While the former course was compulsory for PR majors, the latter was purely optional. Most of the participants highlighted the fact that consequently, public relations students were most likely to get involved in service-learning projects. Another point they made was that CSR was not known across the campus, such as by students from other faculties or programmes, they shared the following remarks:

“Other faculties also have the MPU course to let the students choose the course related to community service.”

“Like us, we took CSR course and this course required us to conduct activities and events to help the people from the community. So, if this course is not compulsory, I don’t think we will be asked to organize the activities for the community.”

Table 7

Thematic Map of Academic Course

No	Sub-themes
1	Academic-related
2	Required course
3	Corporate social responsibility
4	Community service

Serving the Community

Students claimed that their understandings of service-learning were substantially linked to the community as community service was integrated into academic courses. Based on the findings, service-learning therefore, refers to the following: 1. Services offered to the Community; 2. Services Benefitting the Community; and 3. Helping or Giving Back to the Community. Although participants from the focus groups offered numerous perceptions and definitions of service-learning, they consented that service-learning comprised giving back to the community through community service. Additionally, service-learning allowed them to apply what they had learned in the classroom to meet existing community needs. They also acknowledged that service-learning encompassed a personal approach, whereby it was not just a learning experience, but an opportunity for students to essentially contribute to the community. For instance, service-learning offered intellectually-related service that could be integrated into academic courses, such as the course Corporate Social Responsibility to help the community. This can be seen from what the participants had asserted below:

“I think service-learning in UTAR is just a course to educate students to conduct the activities or events to help and serve the community within one semester, and then it is a practical course whereby we need to do everything practically, we need to plan what we are going to do in order to serve the community before executing the activities.”

“Service-learning provides opportunity for students to apply those theories learned in class, in a practical setting. So, service-learning normally provides service activities which address real community needs.”

“I think service-learning is helping the community and doing good things to the society. In addition, instead of studying in the classroom, we can go out of the classroom and carry out activities that benefit the community.”

As a matter of fact, the responses gathered from the participants validated their perspectives towards the pedagogical approach that involved hands-on activities aiming at addressing real community needs by promoting the application of theoretical knowledge learned in classroom. Moreover, the participants also raised their awareness of the importance of the pedagogical approach as a means to serve the community by creating favorable impacts that would result in mutual benefits for everyone involved.

Table 8

Thematic Map of Serving the Community

No	Sub-themes
1	Community-based project
2	Involving the community
3	Serving while learning
4	Benefitting the community
5	Practical learning

Data Triangulation

Generally, each method employed in this study accesses a specific point of view on the same subject, that is students' perspectives towards service-learning. As long as all the methods were considered to be on an equal footing, they could be employed either sequentially or concurrently (Flick, 2014). For instance, employing interviews to design a survey questionnaire could not be referred to as a triangulation strategy since both approaches were not considered on an equal footing (Flick, 2017). Having said that, the triangulation strategy applied in the current study was deemed appropriate because the methods used were treated fairly.

As absolute convergence of results is not common in qualitative research, triangulation is deemed necessary in producing a range of possible datasets that contains appropriate and relevant answers to the study (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). For instance, documents analysis and observation methods have been considered by the researchers of this study not merely to validate the results derived from the focus group interviews, but were also meant to explore the dimensions absent from each method, particularly in the second phase of the data collection.

Document Analysis

In order to substantiate the findings obtained from the interviews, 200 documents were collected and analyzed. More than 80 percent of the themes and codes yielded from the focus groups interviews were also found to be present in the documents reviewed (See Table 8). The researchers acknowledged that the documents selected and gathered from the various sources were not created for the purpose of the present research, but they were considered for other reasons. Thus, the writers and audiences of the documents did not necessarily share similar aims as the current study. In other words, using pre-existing documents as the only source of information would not offer the content required to meet the research objectives of the present study as they were not created for such purposes (Morgan, 2022). Therefore, these pre-existing documents were regularly used with other forms of data for triangulation to improve the reliability of a study, such as the information gathered from focus groups and observations in the case of the present study (Morgan, 2022). In fact, the findings yielded from various data sets could be corroborated if different methods were employed to gather data and eventually, the potential for biases could be minimized (Bowen, 2009).

In response to the concerns of validity of documents and biasness that might occur during the analysis, the information generated from the documents analysis was considered as a resource to authenticate mostly the events of service-learning discussed by the focus group participants. Consequently, the

researchers were unlikely to be misled by the information offered in the documents, but tended to be more objective when analyzing the contents of the documents gathered (Yin, 2009). Moreover, considering that certain codes required responses from the students themselves, it was thus understood that the documents could not offer such information themselves. Observation was therefore, deemed necessary to further validate the findings.

Table 9

Themes and Sub-themes of the Documents Reviewed

Themes	Sub-themes	CS (N=3)	FW (N=10)	NA (N=72)	UN (N=112)	UR (N=3)
Experiential learning activities	Hands-on skills	/	/	/	/	/
	Real-life experience	/	/	/	/	/
	Combination of service and learning	/	/	/	/	/
	Organizing activities and events	/	/	/	/	/
Academic course	Academic-related	/	/	/	/	/
	Required course	/	/		/	/
	Corporate social responsibility	/	/	/	/	/
	Community service	/	/	/	/	/
Serving the community	Community-based project	/	/	/	/	/
	Involving the community	/	/	/	/	/
	Serving while learning	/	/	/	/	
	Benefitting the community		/	/	/	
	Practical learning	/	/		/	
3	13	12 (92%)	13 (100%)	11 (85%)	13 (100%)	11 (85%)

Observations

During the observations, the researchers merely observed and jotted down field notes without participating in the events. The activities carried out by the students were strongly related to what was found in the focus group interviews and in the documents analyzed. It could be concluded that the project involved experiential learning activities, in which the students carried out field work in engaging the local community members, as part of their coursework. As such, the activities implemented could be regarded as both meeting the academic requirements and at the same time serving the community. This was also reflected in the students' project tagline *Serving the Community, Restoring Faith in Humanity*.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explores and investigates students' perspectives towards service-learning at a private university in Malaysia. Data analyzed from this study shows that students understand service-learning as a pedagogical approach that comprises experiential learning activities that are carried out to serve the community, as required in the curriculum. These results are consistent with studies in the past emphasizing the pedagogical approach in promoting experiential learning via community engagement (Gardner & Emory, 2018; Gonzales et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Experiential learning activities are acknowledged as an essential aspect of service-learning as it gives students the chance to develop their practical skills rather than merely learning theories. The learning goal is attained when community service is integrated into academic coursework through several courses offered by the respective faculties.

Findings from the current study indicate that service-learning is a pedagogical approach that allows students to learn out of the classroom. The findings also highlight the courses that allow students to learn practically instead of theoretically. The course syllabi of these courses entail the application of academic knowledge in organizing community projects and assessing their own progress while being monitored by their instructors. As such, the student participants believe that service-learning is plausible to help them develop a holistic understanding of the course and ultimately, to foster valuable skills that are fundamental in their future professions.

Similarly, findings from the current study have helped in understanding the teaching approach that aims at promoting experience-based learning among students. As opposed to the findings revealed in the past that reported a limited knowledge of service-learning among individuals (Bui & Nguyen, 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2022; Thuwayba et al., 2013), the current research shows that the understanding of service-learning among students has improved, particularly in Malaysia.

It is perhaps also important to understand the implications of offering service-learning as an academic course because such courses are typically credit-bearing. In order to graduate, students have to earn a certain amount of credit hours by completing courses and incorporating community service into some of these could boost its adoption. Through their involvement in hands-on projects, students would gain a better understanding of service-learning and the positive effects it has on the community. This is supported by Moely et al. (2002) who report that credit-bearing service-learning programmes are more likely to attract students who are interested to contribute to their community and those who want to pursue professions that entail social responsibility.

The current research findings are in line with the previous research that highlights the significance of incorporating service-learning into tertiary education, so as to nurture students to become civic-minded and responsible global citizens (Boerngen & Kopsell, 2018; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Nepper & Dymond, 2020). Students are able to participate in meaningful community service projects through service-learning and gain real-life experience and community-related knowledge. Based on the participants' responses, these social responsibility initiatives allow them to develop a better understanding of the challenges and complexities in planning, executing, and evaluating a community service project. They further asserted that this learning experience would eventually help them to be someone who would be equipped with knowledge and skills to tackle these challenges when they joined the workforce in the future.

The underpinning idea of service-learning lies in the notion of service provision learning through community engagement. In addition, service is identified as the third mission of a university after teaching and research, as the literature suggests. Generally, service-learning is defined as a teaching approach emphasizing community service in meeting the students' learning outcomes and community needs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Chan et al., 2021; Nepper & Dymond, 2020; Pak, 2020). Results from the current study were reflected in the definition of service-learning provided by scholars, while students' perspectives in the current study showed that service-learning was about serving the community through certain courses at the university.

It is evident that the institution studied has placed great emphasis on community service as a vital element of service-learning. It has done so through several courses which sought to establish strong connections with the community. Relevant academic programmes, facilities, and resources were offered to promote active involvement among students in community outreach projects which were aimed at contributing to the growth of the local community. In other words, the implementation of service-learning in the campus necessitates students to engage the local community members through community service projects, which the institution believes will allow the students to learn about the social and cultural context of the community they serve. Likewise, the idea of serving the community is deemed another essential element of service-learning, whereby students are expected to help those in need by spending their time, resources and knowledge for a worthy cause through public service projects and charitable work. The students' perspectives towards service-learning are therefore, substantially linked to the community through the integration of community service into academic courses at higher education.

The expectancy-value theory posits that individuals' motivation and engagement in tasks are influenced by their expectations of success and the value they place on the activity. Viewed through this theoretical lens, the findings suggest that students' understandings of service-learning as a curriculum-required approach combining experiential learning with community service align with the theory's value component. Students perceive service-learning as valuable because it offers practical skills development and real-world application of academic knowledge whilst enhancing the utility value of their education.

The improved understanding of service-learning among Malaysian students compared to findings in past research suggests an increase in expectancy, as students become more familiar with the concept and its benefits. The credit-bearing nature of service-learning courses further increases both expectancy and value, as students see a clear path to academic success (expectancy) while also valuing the community contribution and professional development aspects (attainment and utility value). The emphasis on developing civic-minded, responsible global citizens through service-learning speaks to the attainment value, as students may see these qualities as important to their self-concept and future goals. The institution's focus on community engagement and strong community connections in service-learning courses enhances the contextual support for students' expectations of success. Finally, the integration of community service into academic courses allows students to learn about social and cultural contexts while helping those in need, which may increase intrinsic value (enjoyment of the task) and utility value (relevance to future goals) simultaneously.

Overall, the study's findings suggest that service-learning, as implemented in this Malaysian university, effectively leverages multiple components of the expectancy-value theory to enhance student motivation and engagement in community-oriented educational experiences. Having said that, the extent of its integration into the university's wider curriculum is limited. This discovery points to a

significant opportunity for the university's educators, decision-makers and policy makers to consider a more comprehensive inclusion of service-learning in their academic courses.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The sample collected from the current study might not be entirely representative of all the students from the institution even though efforts were made to recruit participants from a diverse range of faculty and student cohorts. As the number of experienced students in service-learning was limited at the institution, challenges were encountered in recruiting and engaging participants from different programmes and faculties. Additionally, recruiting participants who showed willingness to participate in the study was found to be challenging. Potential participants who were eligible for the study were constrained by various factors ranging from the personal, geographical to temporal. Inevitably, this study has encountered several limitations and gaps in the knowledge of service-learning within the context of a private higher learning institution. These limitations and gaps still need to be overcome and filled. Most notably, the current study was constrained to only a single private institution. Therefore, it would be useful to see whether students from other institutions, especially public institutions share the same perspectives as the students from the institution selected for this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As the current study has merely focused on students' perspectives towards the pedagogical approach, it is suggested for future research to involve faculty members and community partners who have had previous experience participating in service-learning projects so as to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the approach can be developed. While service-learning is often perceived as a pedagogical method used to gain mutual benefits for both students and community partners, the tangible outcome to the community is not always apparent. As a matter of fact, the engagement between the campus and community partners with whom the students collaborate is expected to offer a more holistic understanding of service-learning as a pedagogical approach, specifically in terms of its impacts on the people and institutions involved, including benefits and challenges of the partnership. Considering such collaborations are likely to develop sustainable and meaningful community service projects that meet the needs of communities through service-learning programmes, future investigations can emphasize the experiences of the faculty members and community partners in service-learning projects, and their perspectives towards the benefits and challenges of the engagement. Lastly, the ideas of these two partners in service-learning projects, in terms of the strategies used in promoting university-community engagement and student learning can also be considered.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the UTAR Scientific and Ethical Review Committee of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) (U/SERC/49/2023).

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