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Romanticising Knowledge and Being: The Epistemological and Ontological Formation of Students through SULAM in Service to Society

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"Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." -

David A.Kolb

"Being is not what it is; it is what it becomes." - Paolo Freire.

SULAM and UiTM

SULAM, a term coined to stand for Service-Learning Malaysia, University for Society, was introduced as part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education (2016). SULAM integrates classroom learning with community service, turning knowledge into action and theory into practice.

At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), SULAM has been implemented across many courses to instil lifelong learning values. It reflects UiTM's role as an academic institution and a university serving society. Through SULAM, students develop knowledge, soft skills, and social awareness while contributing to the community. This article examines epistemological and ontological perspectives that romanticise knowledge and existence through SULAM in a course at UiTM.

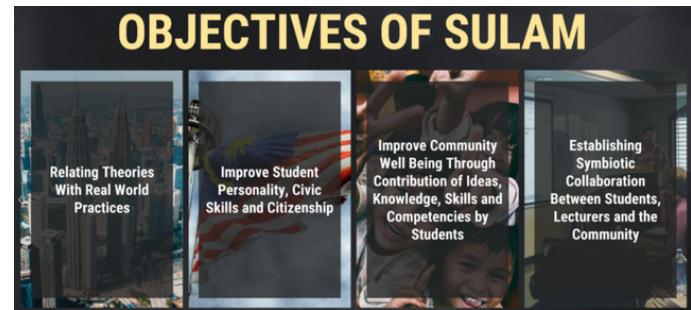
The Saga of SULAM

SULAM demonstrates how learning becomes more meaningful when knowledge extends beyond the classroom. In the Talent Acquisition course (HRM552), concepts related to career planning, job search strategies, networking, and interview skills were not only studied theoretically but also applied in a community setting. This approach made learning more practical and relevant to real life.

At Pusat Koreksional Puncak Alam, a two-day program with inmates provided a striking example. Activities such as group discussions and role-playing created an engaging space where participants gained confidence and prepared themselves for re-entering the workforce. This highlights how education becomes even more meaningful when it is applied in real-life practice (Smith, 2020).

Through service-learning, students began to see their roles in society differently, learning empathy, teamwork, and leadership in the process. Education, in this sense, is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about reshaping perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of our connection with others (Bernasconi & Blume, 2023). By doing so, SULAM demonstrates how higher education can contribute to wider social goals, from quality education to stronger, more inclusive communities.

The Essence of SULAM



Source: <https://hea.uitm.edu.my/index.php/service/key-initiatives/sulam>

SULAM matters because it creates a meaningful link between students, universities, and communities. **For students**, it offers an opportunity to apply theory to practice. Instead of only learning from books or lectures, they experience the challenges and rewards of working with real people. They also develop essential soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. More importantly, they build empathy and resilience, qualities that prepare them to face a complex and competitive job market. **For universities (in this case, UiTM)**, SULAM highlights their role as social institutions. In this way, UiTM will produce competitive graduates with degrees and individuals guided by strong values. By engaging with the community, the university enhances its reputation as a responsible institution that contributes to national development. These initiatives also open doors for partnerships with industry, NGOs, and government agencies. **For the community**, SULAM brings knowledge, skills, and opportunities for learning and development. The project conducted in Puncak Alam prepared inmates for life after prison by equipping them with practical tools, including job search strategies, interview skills, and confidence-building activities. In other projects carried out in schools, children gained new learning experiences. Meanwhile, separate initiatives in rural communities provided training that improved the livelihoods of residents. Collectively, these activities reflect the spirit of "knowledge for society," as knowledge shared with people is knowledge that blesses everyone. Through such efforts, communities feel seen, supported, and connected, creating lasting bonds between them and the university.

In short, students contribute their energy and knowledge, universities provide academic support and leadership, and communities share real-world lessons that enrich everyone involved.

Education as Lived Experience

As Malaysians often say, "knowledge is for life"; knowledge should serve life and people. SULAM reveals that education extends beyond knowledge, where students engage meaningfully with communities. This engagement transforms education into a journey of both knowing and being, romanticising the pursuit of knowledge as a profoundly human and shared experience. Epistemologically and ontologically, SULAM shapes students as learners while equally grounding them as human beings serving society.



References

Bernasconi, C. & Blume, L. B. (2023). "A Synechistic Conceptualization of Othering: Social Ontological Questions in Service Learning", *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 29(2). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mjcsl.3672>

Service Learning Malaysia - University For Society (SULAM) <https://hea.uitm.edu.my/index.php/service/key-initiatives/sulam>

Smith, M. (2020). It really does depend: Towards an epistemology (and ontology) for everyday social pedagogical practice. / *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 9(1): 18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2020.v9.x.018>.