Student Leaders: How Do They Perceive Community Service Activities?

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Abstract: Most of higher learning institutions conduct community service activities involving both the students and staff. In some foreign universities, community service is even tailored as grade-earning courses that benefit the students academically and socially. With the numerous benefits gained from the activity, this paper explored the perceptions and attitudes of the student leaders on community service activity. This study was conducted in two universities in Pahang, Universiti Teknologi Mara Pahang (UiTM Pahang) and Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). It applied The Community Service - Learning Attitudes and Perception Scale (CSLAPS). The findings showed that the student leaders from UiTM Pahang were more socially-driven in contrast to the UMP SRC who were mostly academically driven while engaging themselves with community based programmes. They also showed an interest in joining the activities in the future and most of the student leaders from these two institutions could see the importance of such activities. This research information could be used by the learning institutions to engage their student leaders in an academic based community service as a way of learning and contributing back to the society and to create versatility among the future leaders.

Keywords: Community service, Community service learning, Student leaders

1. Introduction

One of the factors that contribute to the problem of unemployment among university graduates is students' quality. There are many complaints from employers who say that most of the graduates fail to meet the requirements as expected. Graduates' inability to think critically, less problem-solving skills, leadership skills, teamwork, lack of skills to use Information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and poor command of English are some of the concerns that are often raised by employers. Leadership development is vital because it can affect productivity, shape a positive culture and promote harmony. One of the efforts made by the Ministry of Education (MOE) is to enhance human capital through the acquisition of knowledge, the fostering and strengthening of community's cultural and moral values. It is planning to enrich human capital as the main thrust of development in achieving the aspirations of Vision 2020.

Community service learning is one of the programmes that can sharpen students' soft skills especially leadership skills. Putnam (1993) defined community service as an unpaid work for community betterment. According to Dugan and Komives (2010) found that participation in community service learning was a significant predictor in socially responsible leadership outcomes, save for consciousness of self and change. In addition, Birmingham (2013) stated that, students will develop leadership skill through community service. Most of the students are still not aware of the importance of involving in community service activities and it is vital for the university to investigate their perceptions and attitudes towards these activities. Due to that,

this study was conducted to explore the perceptions and attitudes of the student leaders on community service activity (CS) and community service learning (CSL).

2.   Literature Review

Studies on community service and community service learning have been done by numerous researchers all over the world with their various benefits discussed thoroughly. For instance, a research by Lakin and Mahoney (2006) reported the effectiveness of the programme in empowering and promoting a sense of community among youths in the USA. The researchers suggested that taking part in the community service program will increase youths' self-reported empathy and develop intention to be involved in future community action. The other benefit can also be seen in the United Kingdom (UK) when participating students between the ages of 16 to 24 were reported to show their tendency to participate in volunteerism to learn new skills (Low et al., 2007) – a participation that could bring impacts to students, communities, education institutions, and employers (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). Furthermore, community service can also increase personal awareness, social awareness, and improve student learning outcomes (Prentice and Robinson, 2010; Duffy et al., 2008).

According to Latham (n.d), community service personally benefits the students at present and the future. She reported that youth who volunteer just one hour or more a week are 50% less likely to abuse alcohol, cigarettes, become pregnant, or engage in other destructive behaviour. Volunteering in community service will also develop soft skills among youngsters like learning to respect others; to be helpful and kind; to understand people's differences; developing leadership skills, becoming more patient, and better understanding of citizenship. Other than that, youth's community engagement can also benefit them academically. In addition, Abrokwah et al., (2010) found that students are altruistic towards voluntary activities and that previous knowledge and experience influence their attitude and perception towards community service. In spite of this revelation students do not usually join voluntary associations. As stated by Mohd Fathi et al., (2013) the level of impact by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Community Service courses are high for soft skills element, with professional ethics and morals the most dominant. In order to enhance the soft skills of students, it is suggested that the university implement this course as a requirement for graduation.

3.   Methodology

A survey questionnaire was adapted from previous studies (Bender and Jordaan, 2007; Wilson and Hicks, 2010). The survey was distributed to Students Representative Council (SRC) members of Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang and Universiti Malaysia Pahang, by using the convenience sample technique. An appointment was arranged with all the SRC members with twenty minutes allocated for them to answer the survey. The response was 100%.

The questionnaire comprises 3 sections; section A was allotted for the demographic profile of the respondents, section B was about participation and experience in community service and section C referred to volunteering impact on their personal attributes. Measurement for experience and participation in community service was employed from Bender and Jordaan (2007) and volunteering impact was employed from Wilson and Hicks (2010). The data were then entered into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data obtained from this study.

4. Research Findings

This study involved 34 SRC members, 4 males and 10 females from Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang and 12 and 8 respectively from Universiti Malaysia Pahang with mostly aged between 20 to 21 years old for UiTM and 22 to 23 years old for UMP. All UMP SRC members were degree students and UiTM Pahang were diploma students. Majority of them acquired 3.00 to 3.99 CGPA showing that those in SRC have a good academic background. Most of the respondents from both universities have less than one year experience in SRC and came from a family with good volunteerism background.

Table 1. Reasons for Volunteerism Involvement

UiTM Pahang	UMP
Build the spirit of teamwork	Concern for humanities
Enhance soft skills	Contribute to society
Gain some experience	Develop humanities
Build confidence	Show interest
Gain satisfaction in helping others	Want to help others
Want to help others	

Table 1 shows respondents' reasons for their community service engagement, mainly stating that helping others as the reason shared by the SRC members from both universities.

Table 2. Participation and Experience in Volunteerism Activities

Participation & Experience	UiTM Pahang		UMP	
	YES	NO	YES	NO
Previous volunteerism activities experience	(100%)14	-	(100%)20	-
Current participation in volunteerism activities	(78.6%) 11	(21.4%) 3	(90%)18	(10%) 2
Would you like to do volunteerism activities related to your curricular only	(21.4%) 3	(78.6%) 11	(85%) 17	(15%) 3
Would you like to do volunteerism activities for performance evaluation	(21.4%) 3	(78.6%) 11	(80%) 16	(20%) 4
Would you like to joint any event of volunteerism activities	(100%) 14	-	(95%)19	(5%) 1
Have you been consistently involved in any volunteerism activities	(64.3%) 9	(35.7%) 5	(85%) 17	(15%) 3
Primary reason that would motivate enrolment in volunteerism activities?				
Module/Course requirements	-		-	
Interest	14.3% (2)		35% (7)	
Develop/learn new skills	42.9% (6)		20% (4)	
Career/future plan	7.1% (1)		-	
Satisfaction (to help others)	35.7% (5)		45% (9)	

Table 2 shows the experience and participation in volunteerism activities among SRC members from both universities. 100% of SRC members from UiTM Pahang and UMP have previously experienced volunteerism activities with a majority of them currently participating in the activities. Different opinions can be seen between the SRC of both universities when asked

whether their community engagement was purely curricular. Most of UiTM Pahang SRC said that their involvement was not solely curricular in contrast to the majority of UMP SRC members who perceived their community service engagement as purely curricular. The similar pattern can also be seen when they responded to whether their involvement should be evaluated. Most of UiTM Pahang SRC disagreed with the statement in contrast to most of UMP SRC members who agreed that their involvement in community service should be evaluated. The findings naturally follow their perception on whether or not their community service engagement is purely curricular. Most of the student leaders showed interest to participate in the activities in the future with most SRC members from UiTM Pahang chose developing and learning new skills as their primary motivation for volunteerism activities. Meanwhile, majority of their UMP counterparts admitted gaining satisfaction from helping others.

Table 3. Satisfaction Outcomes in Volunteerism Activities

Satisfaction outcomes	UiTM Pahang		UMP	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have been able to make an important contribution in volunteerism activities.	4.00	.679	4.55	.605
The experience of in volunteerism activities has been a worthwhile one.	4.00	.555	4.60	.598
I am enjoying my experience in volunteerism activities.	4.57	.514	4.65	.587
My experience in volunteerism activities has been personally fulfilling.	3.93	.917	4.65	.489

Table 3 reports the SRC members' satisfaction in doing community activities. Most of the SRC members from both universities felt the satisfaction from their community engagements. They felt that they were able to contribute to the society and the experience was worthwhile. A Majority of them also admitted that they enjoyed the activities. However in terms of self-fulfillment, the student leaders differed as the mean from SRC members UiTM Pahang was lower than that of UMP.

Table 4. Understanding outcomes in Volunteerism Activities

Understanding outcomes	UiTM Pahang		UMP	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Volunteerism activities helped me to understand the importance of those activities.	4.50	.519	4.75	.444
I have learned how to deal with a greater variety of people through volunteerism activities.	4.50	.650	4.75	.444
Volunteerism activities allow me to gain a new perspective on things.	4.36	.633	4.70	.470
Volunteerism activities let me learn through direct "hands on" experience.	4.50	.519	4.65	.489

Most of the SRC members from both universities had a really good understanding of volunteerism activities as the mean for all the four items were higher than 4.00. They perceived the importance of the activities which expose them to the wider public, provide new perspectives and direct experience to those involved.

Table 5. Career Outcomes in Volunteerism Activities

Career outcomes	UiTM Pahang		UMP	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Volunteerism activities experience will look good on my resume.	4.07	.829	4.45	.826
Volunteerism activities can help me complete my assignments and projects in a better way.	3.79	1.051	4.45	.826
Volunteerism activities experience drive me to continue involve it in my future plan.	4.43	.514	4.60	.681
It is worth it to join volunteerism activities.	4.21	.699	4.85	.366

As shown in Table 5, most of the SRC members from both universities showed good perceptions on their career outcomes in joining the volunteerism activities. They mostly believed that the activities could leave a good impression on their resume and lead to a better completion of tasks. The positive views can also be seen when the student leaders mostly felt the drive to continue their civic involvements in the future and felt when are worthwhile experience.

Table 6. Enhancement Outcomes in Volunteerism Activities

Enhancement outcomes	UiTM Pahang		UMP	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Volunteerism activities make me feel needed.	4.36	.633	4.50	.688
From volunteerism activities, I feel better about myself.	4.43	.514	4.55	.605
Volunteerism activities make me feel important.	4.29	.611	4.35	.813
Volunteerism activities are a way to make new friends.	4.64	.497	4.50	.607

Table 6 indicates that high means can also be seen from the enhancement outcome as the SRC members from both universities felt that their engagement in community based activities makes them feel needed, better about themselves and important. They also believed that such activities could be the avenue to sharpen their interpersonal skills as it is seen as a way to make new friends.

Table 7. Comparative Mean Outcomes in Volunteerism Activities

Volunteerism outcomes	UiTM Pahang		UMP	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Satisfaction	16.5	1.70	18.5	1.76
Understanding	17.9	2.07	18.9	1.53
Career	16.5	2.62	18.4	2.13
Enhancement	17.7	1.64	17.9	2.45

The mean outcomes for volunteerism activity between the SRCs indicate that the highest mean is for "understanding". It means that most of the SRC members knew the importance of volunteerism activities as shown in Table 7, an outcome that can make community service involvement among students worthwhile and needed.

5.   Conclusion & Recommendation

It can be concluded that a majority of the SRC members from both universities had positive views on community service activities. This can be seen from their active involvement in the programme and interest shown when asked about the future community service engagement. It is also interesting to note that the student leaders from both institutions differed significantly when asked whether their involvement was purely curricular. The SRC members from UiTM Pahang were seen as socially- driven unlike their UMP counterparts who were more academically-driven while engaging with the community. These particular findings can be used by both institutions in engaging the leaders more with the community, with its social and academic benefits made balanced as to ensure that the students, academia and society as a whole could benefit mutually from such programmes. A majority of them also felt satisfied from their involvement with most of them having a good understanding on the purposes of doing the activity. They could see the impacts of community service on their career and had a positive view of themselves, admitting that the involvement leads to their personal betterment. This reiterates the findings by Astin et al., (2010) that reported students had gained increased personal values through their community engagement activities. With all the promising outcomes, universities should take advantage on the student leaders' optimistic views on community service and expose them more to this beneficial activities as they can certainly be a good role model for all the students as far as community service involvement is concerned.

6.   References

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