

## **EFFECTIVENESS AND BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING: PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN SARAWAK**

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**ABSTRACT** Service learning is a pedagogical approach that has been applied in educational institutions worldwide since the 1970s. Beginning 2019, service learning has been implemented under the name ‘Service Learning Malaysia – University for Society’ (or SULAM) in the Malaysian university curriculum, including in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). However, in general, there has been lack of research regarding the effectiveness of service learning. This paper examines UNIMAS students’ perceptions of service learning projects. It describes the results of a study conducted among 83 second year Anthropology and Sociology students to investigate the effectiveness of service learning at the university level in Malaysia. The contents of the students’ reflection papers form the qualitative data of this study, which were analysed thematically using the inductive approach. The findings of this study indicate that most students perceive service learning to be effective in that their service learning projects have mainly achieved their goals. Furthermore, there were benefits gained by both students and the community through participation in service learning activities. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge on the efficacy of service learning, and the result show that service learning should continue to be implemented in the Malaysian academic curriculum. Additionally, this research helps to fill a notable void in studies examining the effectiveness and impacts of service learning in the Malaysian university context, particularly in Sarawak.

**Keywords:** Service learning, community engagement, qualitative research, pedagogy

### **INTRODUCTION**

Service learning is a pedagogical approach that has been applied in educational institutions worldwide since the 1970s. Beginning 2019, service learning has been implemented under the name ‘Service Learning Malaysia – University for Society’ in the Malaysian university curriculum, including in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. However, in general, there has been lack of research regarding the effectiveness of service learning in the Malaysian university context especially in Sarawak.

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of the effectiveness and benefits of service learning among students particularly in the Anthropology and Sociology Programme at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UNIMAS.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As a pedagogical approach, service learning has been implemented in educational institutions worldwide since the 1970s. As a form of experiential learning (see Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), service learning has several main characteristics, as outlined by various authors (see Hanafiah, 2024; Kraft, 1996; McLaughlin, 2010; Md Salleh & Mokhtar, 2017; Piper et al., 2000). Firstly, service learning involves students conducting active or hands-on organised service that is integrated as part of the academic curriculum. Secondly, the service is conducted in collaboration between the students and/or educational institutions and community partners to address community needs that have been identified. This requires the students to make use of knowledge and skills gained from the classroom to solve real-world problems in real-life situations in the community. In this way, the students' learning is extended beyond the classroom and into the community, in a manner that enhances the education process. As posited by Soska et al. (2010, p. 140), service learning builds "connections between campus and community, while enriching learning for student." More than just linking educational institutions and community, through the student-community engagements, the service learning pedagogy also links theory and practice (McLaughlin, 2010). Importantly, reflection is a crucial component of service learning, "where students use higher order thinking skills to better understand and extend the formal learning from the service experience" (Kraft, 1996, p. 137), which further enables the students to reflect on their roles in addressing societal needs (Reynolds, 2009). According to Yusof et al. (2020, p. 281, citing Furco [1996]), the aim of service learning is "to produce holistically developed students who are able to think, act and reflect based on empirical evidence and human values."

In Malaysia, early forms of service learning (or more appropriately, student community engagements) have been observed in institutes of higher education since the 1970s, as pointed out by Mamat et al. (2019). Since 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia has included service learning into the university curriculum as part of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education). Since 2019, service learning in Malaysian universities have come to be known as 'Service Learning Malaysia – University for Society' (or SULAM), with the aim of "producing Holistic, Entrepreneurial and Balanced Graduates" (Department of Higher Education Malaysia, 2019). Presently, service learning or SULAM is one of the high impact educational practices (or HIEPs) employed in Malaysian institutions of higher education (see Hanafiah, 2024; Hudin et al., 2018; Mamat et al., 2019; Mohd Naufal et al., 2024; Yusof et al., 2020), including Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, where this present study was conducted.

Despite the decades-long application of service learning in academic curriculum worldwide, Billig (2000) points out that research by service learning providers on the impacts of service learning has been lacking. However, more recent research has begun to fill in this void in showing the impacts of service learning projects among students. For example, the study conducted by McLaughlin (2010) among business graduate students demonstrates the 'real-world' experiences gained by the students through service learning. Other scholars have pointed out the benefits or improvements in terms of social growth, psychological development, moral judgements, civic responsibility and academic achievements (Billig, 2000; Kraft, 1996), as well as academic and leadership skills (Astin et al., 2000; Nurhaliza et al., 2024) among students who have participated in service learning. Furthermore, Mamat et al. (2009) observe the benefits of service learning to students in Malaysia in terms of providing self-confidence and soft skills, as well as improvements in creativity.

Nevertheless, as recently as 2020, Yusof et al. (2020) has noted the continued lack of studies that examine the impact of service learning practices in Malaysia. This is also the case in UNIMAS, where despite having provided service learning as a new pedagogical approach, there has been little research done on the impacts of service learning among its students. It is to address this existing lack that this study was conceived. The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of the effectiveness and benefits of service learning among students particularly in the Anthropology and Sociology Programme at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UNIMAS.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The ‘Introduction to Borneo Archaeology’ (SSF2193) course is one of the service learning courses offered by the Anthropology and Sociology Programme at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UNIMAS. The course is taken by all the programme’s students in their second year of study. As part of the service learning approach of the course, the students are required to design and implement service learning projects in collaboration with community partners – these could be government and non-government institutions, residential communities, student groups, or more widely, the general public (see Reynolds, 2009). In designated groups, students plan projects that are designed to address a predetermined (by the lecturer) aim or theme. The particular aim of the service learning course was to increase awareness of the field of archaeology among the general public. Due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by the country at the time of study, the service learning course and activities were conducted fully online, in accordance to the implementation of online teaching and learning in UNIMAS.

Prior to the planning and implementation of the service learning projects, the needs of the community were first identified. This was done through a short survey that was administered using Google Form and distributed to the general public. The survey was interested in finding out the types of knowledge related to archaeology that the public would like to receive. A total of 1024 responses were received. The result of the survey showed that members of the public were interested in receiving information on how archaeologists find archaeological sites, how to study archaeology, the benefits of studying archaeology, archaeology-related policies, the tools and methods of archaeology, and how archaeologists contribute to the study of the human past.

Based on these identified ‘needs’ of the community, the students then planned and proposed the service learning project and activities that each group will be conducting in order to provide the archaeology-related information to the general public. Like most service learning programmes, the activities were designed “to provide an educational experience and meet the needs of the community” (Piper et al., 2000, p. 159; and see also Mohd Naufal et al., 2024). The service learning activities planned included the conducting of webinars and online exhibitions, the creation of social media platforms (using Facebook and Instagram), and the designing of e-booklets and posters that provided content and information on various aspects of archaeology, which are then shared (and in some cases made) with community partners such as (higher) secondary school students, staff of local museum departments, and the general online public. As part of the documentation of the service learning, the student groups were also required to write and submit a project proposal, and following the implementation of their projects, a project report. As mentioned above, reflection is also one of the important components of service learning. As such, at various stages of their projects (before, during and after), each student was required to write reflections on their experiences of participating in

and conducting the service learning activities. These reflection papers constitute the primary source of data for this study, as described below.

In order to study the students' perceptions of the effectiveness and benefits of service learning, I examined the reflection papers submitted by the students (as part of the assessments of the course) at the end of the service learning course. According to Reynolds (2009, p. 4) "reflection activities are active learning processes that facilitate students' connection between their service in the community and instructional objectives", and as mentioned above, it is a key component of service learning. In the reflection papers, the students provided reflections on their personal experiences of conducting the service learning at various stages (before, during, and after) of their projects. Thus, multiple reflections were obtained with regard to the student's role in community engagement, the importance of service learning or community engagement, and more pertinent to this study, the effectiveness and benefits of service learning.

A total of eight (8) reflection papers were randomly selected for this study. This sample size represents roughly 10% of the total number of students (N=83) registered in the course. The contents of the students' reflections were read multiple times and analysed carefully and in detail in order to extrapolate key themes that emerged from the data using the inductive approach, which is used for "creating meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes or categories from the raw data" (Thomas, 2006, p. 239).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the service learning activities conducted by the students are largely perceived to be effective, in terms of fulfilling the goal of increasing awareness of archaeology among the general public. This perception stems from the personal opinions of the students themselves, and from feedback received by the students from the community. Examples of the personal opinions given by students are as below (all statements by the research participants have been edited by the author in terms of spelling and grammar to improve readability, without changing their contents and meanings).

*"This project has achieved its goals through various activities that have been implemented during the webinar. Through the activities that been implemented, students are exposed to the knowledge and understanding about archaeology and archaeological sites." (Student 2)*

*"Our SULAM project has managed to succeed in all the goals...Through careful and systematic organisation and summarising of the content, combined with great graphic design - we have managed to publish 10 posts, each one exhibiting a different archaeological site. We have disseminated knowledge and archaeological information regarding those sites using a wide variety of credible sources." (Student 3)*

On the other hand, students' comments on the effectiveness of the service learning activities based on the positive feedback they received are as below.

*"...based on the evaluation of the webinar programme, the participants have given positive comments and have accepted the programme because they*

*think that the programme is interesting and can be organised again in the future.” (Student 1, original comments in Malay, translated by the author)*

*“A total of 30 respondents responded that through this project, they were interested in getting involved in the field of archeology. Therefore, I believe that our group has achieved the main goal albeit not comprehensively.” (Student 5)*

*“I can say that this e-SULAM project has succeeded in achieving its goal. More people express their interest in learning more about archaeology after reading our e-booklet.” (Student 7)*

Besides the students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of service learning, the analysis of the students’ reflection papers has also highlighted the perceived benefits of service learning to both the students and the community. A total of seven (out of eight) students highlighted personal and community gains, as described below.

The personal gains of the students can be divided into several categories: knowledge/self-learning; personal or work values such as teamwork, commitment and confidence; and skills such as communication, community engagement, critical thinking and software use. In terms of the service learning activities providing benefits to the students, the findings of this study correspond to the previous findings obtained by researchers such as Hanafiah (2024) and Nurhaliza et al. (2024). The personal gains are exemplified by the statements below.

*“When planning this project and implementing it, many processes are involved...to ensure that everything works well. Hence, this project also teaches me that teamwork and commitment are crucial aspects.” (Student 2)*

*“Therefore, this SULAM project teaches us as students to be smart in dealing with problems professionally and have effective communication with the community.” (Student 5)*

*“Personally, after completing the project, I think at some part of this project is not only to promote what is archeology all about to people outside there, but it also helps my self-learning on archaeology. What I learn in class has been widen more by doing this project. I realised that when I look into some information that is required for the project’s contents and the more that I search for it, the more information that I get. Plus, it also gives me a whole different level of experience because this project required us to engage with community and it is very interesting to listen to community perspectives about archaeology as it is something new to me.” (Student 6)*

*“The communication which I had with the viewers of the virtual museum exhibition was effective that I had to think critically and analyse before I tell something to them because I have to be correct with points. This attitude encouraged me to enhance my communication skills. I also learned to use a new software which is ‘Artstep’. I will be able to use this in the future and also recommend to others as I am already used to it. This SULAM project gave me the courage to try new things and also to be confident enough to*

*overcome challenges and obstacles wisely in everything in order to achieve our goals.” (Student 8)*

Moreover, the findings of this study show that through their participation in the service learning activities conducted by the students, the members of the community have gained awareness, knowledge and new appreciation of archaeology, as exemplified by the statements below.

*“...the SULAM project has benefitted the community through gaining knowledge, basic exposure about archaeology and archaeological sites, as well as knowing the importance of studying archaeology. They gain knowledge after listening to the talk session during the webinar and the videos on archaeology and archaeological sites. Besides, [the secondary school] students also received basic exposure about archaeology and archaeological sites that can help to change their perspective about this field. For example, our participants, Form 5 and Form 6 students, gave positive feedback to us and said that they are thankful because we held the webinar with lots of useful and knowledgeable information to them. Additionally, they also learned the importance of studying of archaeology that could be related to today’s era. Thus, it shows that this SULAM project do benefit community in many ways to enhance their awareness of archaeology in Malaysia.” (Student 2)*

*“I can see that from the survey we distributed to general online public in Malaysia, the community benefited from this project by gaining more information on archaeology. The feedback shows that 83.1% of 60 respondents agree that their understanding on archaeology increased after reading the e-booklet. From this project, majority of our respondents are able to increase their knowledge on what are the contributions of archaeologists in history, how archeologists find the excavation sites, and methodology in archaeology.” (Student 7)*

It is also worth noting that none of the students’ reflections mentioned any concerns about possible negative impacts of their projects. However, one student (Student 4) did raise issues about conducting the service learning. Nevertheless, the student’s statement is more concerning project planning and the dynamics (or problem) of conducting group work, and rather than directly related to the effectiveness (or lack of) of the service learning activities conducted, as shown in the statement below.

*Our first plan was to conduct an online meeting with the other anthropology students from different university. Our difficulty was that it is difficult to find those students... The next problem is our group members. Members in the group do not share their thoughts in group chat.” (Student 4)*

## CONCLUSION

Service learning is a pedagogy that enhances the learning experience, and links the university with the community. Thus, service learning is supposed to benefit both the students and community. The results of this study supports this idea. This study has shown that students who participated in service learning perceive service learning projects to be effective in addressing

the needs of the community, in this case in increasing awareness of archaeology among general public. This study has also shown the personal and community gains from service learning activities. However, this study was conducted only on students who conducted the service learning activities. In order to get a more holistic perspective, further research should also focus on the perceptions of the community members who participated or collaborated in the service learning. This study thus adds to the growing body of knowledge on the efficacy of service learning, and the overall results suggest that service learning should continue to be implemented in the Malaysian academic curriculum as an effective way of preparing students for the realities of working life and community engagement. Additionally, this research helps to fill a notable void in studies examining the effectiveness and impacts of service learning in the Malaysian university context, particularly in Sarawak.

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