

Chapter 7

Integrating Service Learning Into Higher Education Curriculum: Developing Business Undergraduates' Competencies

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of integrating service learning into the business curriculum of a higher education provider to enhance learners' competencies and reflective learning. Founded on the educational theories of constructivism and social learning, this research consolidates and takes research forward in the understanding of how transforming the business curriculum by integrating service learning through teacher-learner partnerships enhances a students' ability for reflective learning. Using a self-administered questionnaire-based survey with 256 respondents, the data were analysed using variance based PLS-SEM to reveal that service learning had a significant positive influence on reflective learning and on student competency development. The results indicate the positive impact that team-based service learning through teacher-learner partnerships had on the learners' experience. These findings offer some interesting insight for educators, researchers, and policy makers as a means to enhance the learning experience of students in tertiary education in Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of how best to prepare the graduate for employment has received both academic and practitioner attention over the years, with tertiary education providers often the focus of this discussion and criticized for not addressing the ‘graduate skills gap.’ Also, tertiary education providers do not appear to be engendering learners with the appropriate employability skills required by employers (Anon, 2020; Turner et al., 2020; Teng et al., 2019; Verma et al., 2018; Turner & Mulholland, 2017). This criticism is arguably somewhat unfair if taken in the context of the labor market and the responsibilities tertiary education providers have towards ensuring students’ have an appropriate learning experience within the parameters set by professional and government regulatory bodies. It could be argued that tertiary education providers can take some time to develop academic programs and are perhaps more risk-averse when it comes to product launches. Equally, it can be argued that the competency of academic staff and the quality of the education provided impact on graduate unemployment, but there is also a responsibility for employers to train graduates to ensure a successful transition to the workplace (Anon, 2020; Hanapi & Nordin, 2013). Blame for the graduate skills gap cannot merely be apportioned to tertiary education providers alone, mainly when there is a lack of employment opportunities and underemployment in Asian countries (Anon, 2020; Anon, 2019; Stapleton, 2017; Teng & Turner, 2018). Although there are enough employment vacancies in Malaysia, it is the nature of these vacancies, which presents a problem with only 60,000 of the 600,000 employment vacancies at the executive level (Anon, 2019). Unemployment and underemployment among graduates are a collective responsibility and is something which requires further investigation, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and its disruptive impact on the socio-economic environment. In Malaysia, according to the Ministry of Education’s Graduate Tracer Study in 2018, of the 51,000 graduates from 59 public and private universities, 60% were still unemployed one year after graduation (D’Silva, 2020). This figure is arguably going to rise in the post-COVID-19 environment.

In light of the debate, this research will explore the role of tertiary education providers in developing graduate competencies and its capacity to prepare them for the workplace better, focusing on the role of service learning. Engaging with the community as a means to address the graduate skills gap is one of the many initiatives education providers use to engender the necessary employment skills among learners. Other such initiatives include, but are not limited to, work-based learning (WBL), internships, simulations and real-world assessments (Galloway, Marks & Chillas, 2014; King & Newman, 2009; Renganathan, Karim & Li, 2012; Turner et al., 2018; Vos & Brenan, 2010). These other initiatives have been well researched across developed and developing countries, where there exists a gap in the literature, is research surrounding the role of service learning. Research into the impact of service learning within an academic curriculum is still relatively under-researched (Ali, Rahman & Abidin, 2010; Singh et al., 2017) with a lack of insight into the impact on students’ reflective learning abilities and their skills development. This research will, in part, address this gap, consolidating existing literature in the areas of community engagement and graduate work readiness. It will also take research forward in understanding the role engagement with community-related projects play on a students’ reflective learning and development of their graduate competencies.

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To investigate the impact of curriculum connections in service learning on students’ reflective learning.

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