Is International Service-Learning Feasible? A Look at the Student’s Perspectives

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to explore the feasibility of international community service projects for students from Communication Science. The study used an online survey to examine students’ perceptions. Data were collected voluntarily from 49 students taking part in service-learning project linked to empower people in rural areas, using open-ended questions. The results show various issues such as cultures, arts, diversity, environment, public health, and food security needed to be addressed in the program. With regards to the international service-learning, the students valued positively the program’s nature and raised some concerns including distance, cost, and cultural differences. The implementation of domestic community service may lack of preparation and clear instructions. Standardized procedures and guidelines of international service projects serve as key factors in optimizing the program’s benefit.

Keywords: Students’ perceptions, International service-learning, Domestic community service

1 Introduction

The service-learning program is one of Indonesian Tri Dharma or Higher Education responsibilities carried out by faculty members [1]–[5]. The program’s nature includes interdisciplinary, multiple stakeholders, broad dimensions, practicality, and requires active participation of community members [4]. The service aims to address the stakeholder’s needs at which students gain practical hands-on skills, faculty members disseminate an application of recent research findings, and the community benefits from various capacity building activities [6]. Community service projects for undergraduate students are typically meant to improve student’s civic skills including empathy, solidarity, teamwork, communication, and creativity that are incorporated into the academic life [7], [8].

Existing studies demonstrate an incredible deal of academic work explaining undergraduate student service-learning activities. The learning is mostly popular in the disciplines of public health and medicine [5], [9], [10]. During early covid-19 pandemic, student’s service was conducted online to educate community members the importance of health protocols [5]. Encouraging community members to always abide health protocols was essential as information during the early pandemic was extensive, diversified, and most of the times insufficient. Consequently, community engagement was forced with either drastic or unclear measures [10]. Another public health issue in the service training claims community-based integrated service model for older adults improved “frailty, loneliness, and quality of life” in the community [9].

Previous studies also explore the drawbacks and application of community service projects in the field of business and economics, chemical engineering, and architecture [1], [7], [11]. Students of business and economics were not impressed with the fact that conducting service activities virtually as mandatory even though the service developed student’s professional skills [7]. A distinct drawback of the service program highlighted by students of chemical engineering was that expenses were extremely high, but the students were not aware of this fact [1]. Despite the disadvantages, the community service program plays an important role in Bangladeshi heritage conservation through public education leading to sustainable heritage management [11].

To date, Indonesian service training for undergraduate students is carried out off-campus for a semester as a part of Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka or MBKM (Independent Learning – Independent Campus) activities based on Ministerial Regulation No. 3 of 2020 on National Higher Education Standard [1]. The training weighs twenty credit hours and requires students, faculty, and community members active involvement in solving social issues. The application of MBKM service learning is relatively new and studies related to this particularly for students of communication science, is limited [1]. Most scholars focus on the benefit of the local or domestic service-learning and its relationship with student’s social and...
This study aimed to explore communication science student’s opinion on the feasibility of an MBKM-based international service-learning. In this case, students conveyed their perspective related to the service theme, rationale, location, procedure, and perception. In so doing, an online survey was launched and received 49 voluntary responses. The data sets were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results indicate positive values of the international service-learning nature even though students concern with cultural differences, cost, and distance that may appear as the consequences of the program. The service learning may address various social and cultural issues and require clear guidelines and procedure.

2 Methods

Participants (N = 49) were students of Communication Science who have finished conducting their domestic MBKM community service project. They were recruited voluntarily to fill out an online survey regarding international service-learning using a google form. Participants did not receive any compensation for their participation and their service was already assessed prior to this study. The online survey consisted of four open-ended questions asking 1) what issues should be addressed in international service-learning and why; 2) locations of the service; 3) procedure of the international community service; and 4) perceptions of the program. Results of the questionnaire were in the forms of short paragraphs and undertaken qualitatively using thematic analysis.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Personal characteristics of respondents

Among the entire respondents, 67.34% were female, and the rest were male (32.65%). Earlier respondents were placed in 6 locations of domestic community service program; they were Jember, Blitar, and Malang districts in East Java with each district had two different locations. The survey was equally dominated by the respondents who completed the domestic service-learning in Blitar-2 and Jember-2 with a proportion of 20.4%. The remaining locations of the respondents had the proportions ranging from 12.2% to 16.3%.

3.2 Beyond social and cultural issues

In the case of student’s opinion regarding issues that should be addressed in international service-learning, a total of 97% of the respondents thought that social and cultural issues are relevant within the global context. Respondents revealed that cross cultural communication, cultures of Indonesia and Malaysia, and diversity may be best addressed in the service-learning activities. This finding is consistent with earlier study which discusses the role of community service in heritage conservation [11].

The respondents argued that making arts and cultures of Malaysia and Indonesia as the theme of international community service activities will result in a better understanding of Indonesian and Malaysian cultures. As the respondent claimed, “It is common knowledge that Indonesia and Malaysia have an argument regarding the intellectual property of certain cultural product. Addressing cultural and arts in the service will make us [students] look for the similarities rather than the differences.”

Other important issues such as public health, food security, and environment particularly climate change and food waste were also raised. The respondents believed those issues are relevant and the global community is aware of them.

“I think social issues such as environment, gender, education, and so forth will work as citizens of the world have a greater awareness of those issues”

“food security”
“health communication”
“climate change and food waste”

This issue, particularly education, is in line with previous research which explored the need to provide learning centre for street children in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia [12]. Street children become urban’s main concern in many countries across the globe. Access to education has been out of reach for street children, thus contributions from faculty members and students in the format of community engagement as well as support from the government are deemed necessary to achieve a better quality of life for street children [12].

3.3 Between the two countries

Responses related to locations of the international community service were equally divided into agreement and disagreement. The respondents suggested that the location will remain either in Java or outside the island in Indonesia due to distance constraint and cultural differences. The rest of the respondents agreed that the locations will be held in both countries alternately. Unlike students from Chemical Engineering who were unaware of high price of the service [1], some concerns were expressed as students may bear expensive cost in joining the international service-learning.

“Living costs for the students will be pricy when they are assigned to carry out the service training in Malaysia.”

“The cost of community service is skyrocketing for the students unless the Department will bear their transportation fees.”

“The program will be feasible with a condition that the university bears its accommodation fees in Malaysia”

To minimize the cost borne by the students, respondents suggested that this service training is held
international service-learning was varied. Although the respondents’ perception toward the idea of international service-learning was varied. Although the research which argued that students do not like the obligation of working the service virtually and record their activities themselves [7].

3.4 Inside the procedure

Among the community service activity’s mechanism, being well prepared and having a clear guideline were identified as dominant responses, where student’s recruitment and online mode of service-learning were considered least. One respondent suggested that the service activity is divided into three sequences; they are two months of preparation, another two in Malaysia, and the rest of the months in Indonesia.

“The procedure must be clear and the program should be well arranged.”

“International community service will be feasible when there is a great planning for the program preparation and a clear timeline.”

“Student recruitment should be held as it is an international service training and the students selected will be an ambassador of both the university and the country”

“The international community service project may be best held online.”

Three respondents illustrated phases in conducting the international service training. The phases include “preparation, site visit, and implementation.” In the first phase, organizational aspects are carried out including obtaining approval from the university and location of the training, socializing of the program, and dividing students into several groups. The next phase requires students to conduct site visit, analyse problems surround the community, and begin planning service activities as well as the timeline. The implementation of the program is carried out in the last phase. The students within groups organize activities as planned to advocate the community [11].

Carrying out an international service project requires a lot of effort, time, cost, and resources. Previous research find out that students lack of time to implement all service activities [6], [7]. This finding however contradicts the present study since the students have a minimum of four months to conduct the international service-learning. Within the context of cost, most respondents rely on the university support. The results indicate outside funding will attract students to join the international community service. A different outlook from Kazakhstan claimed that obtaining grants does not necessarily mean the program is effective. The grants in fact are ineffective in “enhancing youth pro-social attitudes [13].”

3.5 Underneath the perspective

Respondents’ perception toward the idea of international service-learning was varied. Although the response was dominated by welcoming the idea, 14.28% among the respondents disagreed with the program. A respondent even viewed the program is overly exaggerated. Another respondent thought that rather than advocating overseas community, students should solve multiple and complex domestic problems.

“International service training is a breakthrough from Department of Communication Science when this program has a solid planning.”

“The program will give opportunities to students to learn new cultures and gain new experiences.”

“Students will learn various cultures and people’s habit in Malaysia.”

“The idea is innovative as students can gain various experiences from the program.”

Results of the present study are consistent with earlier research that highlights the benefits of service-learning from student’s perspective [1], [3], [4], [6], [7]. Students improve their public speaking and gain self-confidence to organize activities as well as negotiate with older and younger people in the community [1]. In the essence of student’s personality, the service program improve work ethics, norms compliance, and spiritual behaviours [1], [4]. Rather than considering the service program as a mandatory, it should be viewed by students as a platform to enhance their understanding of their “civic obligations” and “responsibilities of citizenship” [3].” In this case, students have a greater awareness and sensitivity toward social problems surround them, thus lead them to have empathy and desire to participate in the community service-learning.

4 Conclusion

This study presents novel evidence around the feasibility of international service-learning based on student’s point of views. In general, the results suggest diverse issues mainly social and cultural, need to be addressed in the program. Accordingly, the program may be possibly held in Malaysia and Indonesia subject to time allotment and funding support. Its procedure should be clearly outlined in the guidelines and students have sufficient time to make necessary preparations. The international community service project is viewed as a breakthrough which requires detail preparation and solid planning. The study adds to a small but growing literature in analysing the potential of an MBKM based international service-learning for undergraduate students.

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