ADDRESSING CHALLENGES VIA UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES AMONG INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *University-community engagement is a good learning outcome for students' knowledge enrichment as it exposes the students in community issues. Experiences gained through the fieldwork will help the students in preparing themselves for future careers especially in revitalizing their civic consciousness of the society around them. In regard to this, university's students should embrace the opportunities given by the institution. However, the often neglected community in the university-community would be the international students, as the host community. Not only having constraints to adapt with different socio-cultural practices, they are seen as the minority group of people who participate in university-community engagement activities. This paper attempt to explain the challenges of university-community engagement activity participation among international undergraduate students of a private university in Malaysia. Five international undergraduate students participated in this study where data analysis was performed using a qualitative approach. In general, this study reveals that among international undergraduate students, all respondents agreed that university-community engagement activities are a responsibility by a human being in helping the society. Due to the fact that these international students came from different socio-cultural practices, it creates challenges which discourage them from participating in university-community engagement activities. Therefore, this study tries to discover the challenges and provide strategies to overcome this problem to help the university in producing multi-talented students once they graduated from the university.*

Keywords: *University-Community Engagement Activity, Undergraduate Students, International Students*

Introduction

In the coming of the fourth industrial revolutions which relies on the technology per se, the need of graduate students to sharpen their skills, becoming the important mission of each higher institutions, regardless for the public universities nor private universities. The competition of job-market would be higher if the world decided to transform from using human resources to machineries-based. Thus, despites of focusing on the theoretical and practical parts as their learning objectives, the notion of producing handy soft-skills students becoming an agenda as these institutions are responsible to provide human resources in the industry. Hence, in embracing this idea, there are several actions taken by the institutions to produce students who are immerse not only in their particular field course-selection, but also good in their skills. One of the initiatives taken is to promote the university-community engagement activities for the students to improve their compatibility as a well-rounded student who adverse in various parts of knowledge and skills.

According to Aslin and Brown (2004), university-community engagement activities is a voluntary work which needs active participations from the participants himself where they need to cater the real problems which is happening in the real life. Therefore, participation in these activities does help students to give full commitment in handling and managing the decision making needed in specific time. These engagements may take place in different methods such as by involving in extra-curricular activities such as participating in outreach programmes, teaching the technological gadgets to rural students with the aims of demonstrating learning outcomes as well as aiming at improving the quality of education especially to the student himself. Yet, to perform this activity is not easy because it requires commitment from the students and there are certain values that the students (as the volunteer) have to observe, such as the principle of courage, respect and honesty and mutual obligation (Aslin and Brown, 2004; Pardeck, 2015).

Malaysia in particular, is in the process of transforming the industries by approaching the fourth industrial revolutions. However, the major concern of the Ministry of Higher Education is about the capability of graduate students in promoting themselves in job employment. To achieve the target of graduate employability, the higher education institution of Malaysia has taken an approach of promoting university-community engagement activities among students. This is due to the fact that there are many researches proves that university-community engagement activities does provides benefits such as improving student's grades, aspirations and motivations (Norhidayah Ali et al., 2009; Farish, 2014; Krause, 2005). Along these lines too, the higher education institutions were motivated to encourage their students to participate in this activity to fit in the need of the industry.

Unfortunately, there is minimal studies approaching the participation of the international students in this beneficial activities. This situation has led to the research objective of this study on what are the major factors preventing them from participating in volunteer works in Malaysia, in particular. According to Nurul Farhanah (2016), there is minimal participation of postgraduate students at IIUM in university-community engagement activities. Since IIUM is one of the renowned public university in Malaysia, this study tries to investigate the participation of international students from private university in this beneficial activities.

Literature review

Community-engagement activities

There is no definite definition on defining community-engagement activities (Aslin & Brown, 2004; Bacon, 2009). Some definitions highlighted on the need of cooperation and commitment given by the volunteer (Bacon, 2009), while some highlighted on the partnership. Moore et.al (2016) mentioned that these activities generally about the partnership with the community which incorporate values, concerns and aspiration in its implementation. Another definitions highlighted on the principles and basic values (see Table 1) that should be the gist of this beneficial activities (Aslin & Brown, 2004). With these values, this activities can be done and will meet the expectations of the society.

Table 1: Principles of Community Engagement.

Principles *"What Should Be"*	
The Murray-Darling Basin Commission Values	**Principles of Engagement**
Courage	Mandate for change: recognize and act on a mandate for change – involvement in transformation not just transactions. Agreed values: apply Murray-Darling Basin Commission values in all internal and external engagements – 'walk the talk'.
Inclusiveness	Effective communication: recognize that communication patterns need to take the form of a network or web – neither top-down nor bottom up, nor within closed circles, but to and from many sources within a system.
Commitment	Shared vision: shared commitment to a vision for a more sustainable basin made explicit in each engagement process – reality, as well as rhetoric.
Respect & honesty	Representativeness: as many interests as possible given respect and acknowledgment, and represented appropriately – whole system approaches, not fragmentation and division.
Flexibility	Mutual learning: generate fresh ideas and solutions through the mutual exchange of ideas – dialogue as well as discussion and debate.
Practicability	Long-term goals: accept that engagement goals are both here-and-now and future-oriented – they have both 'roots' and 'wings'.
Mutual obligation	Negotiation, collaboration and cooperation: engagement process based on partners' shared responsibility and accountability – collaboration and cooperation, not competition and division.

Source: Aslin and Brown (2004). Towards whole of community engagement: A practical toolkit (p. 17).

With these unidentifiable explanations which serves the definition of university-community engagement, however, the gist of university-community engagement always reflects to commitment, volunteer services and principles which is laid down to make it as a success event (Wallis, 2006; Lanworthy & Turner, 2003; Bernardo, Butcher & Howard, 2011; Driscoll, 2009; Farish, 2014). Based on these definitions and its basic principles, it soon influences other disciplines to lend their hands together in helping the community, such as the stakeholders and learning institutions.

Recently, the notion of community-engagement has now taking place in the higher learning institutions as it is viewed as a good activities for university students. Since the university are seen as a responsible entity in the society, university-community engagement activities is seen as an urgent response in helping the needy ((Farish, 2014; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Therefore, in

order to make it work, participation of students from the higher institutions of learning is important in ensuring the smooth running of the programme (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Looking at the roles played by private universities around the world in applying universities-community engagement, it seems like the activities offer a positive outcomes towards the student, teacher and future development of the university. Public good which is defined as a benefit to society previously common for public institution's role currently has played by private institution too (Collins, 2017). In a paper entitled *Universities and Community Engagement* (2008), it define that community engagement is a specific method for academic research and teaching that necessarily involves external communities such business, industry, schools, governments, non-governmental organisations, associations, indigenous and ethnic communities, and the general public in collaborative activities that address community needs and opportunities while also enriching the teaching, learning and research objectives of the university. According to Collins in his book, he stated that the idea of having community engagement is that the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources (Collins, 2017). Again, with the notion of the commitments and values, it driven the university community to engage with the public especially in fulfilling the community needs.

Benefits of university-community engagement

The need of a good value-laden activities like university community engagement activities is a must in every place. There are a lot of studies proving that it brings bountiful benefits to the doers and the receivers. In this paper, it highlights on the students, as the doer of university-community engagement activities (Hall, 2009; Sawasdikosol, 2009). According to Normah (2011), university-community engagement activities is a good initiative in improving the relationship between students and community. This is truly important because at the end of the day, students will be the agent of socialization in the community. Not only providing benefits to the community at large, this activity also helps in shaping student's character which later aspired the academic achievement and motivate students' emotions (Norhidayah et. al., 2009).

Participation of students in university-community engagement

Yet, with many benefits outlined in the earlier part, the most important thing to make sure that this activity is a success commitment, it requires participation from the university community, especially the students. According to Willms (2000), unfortunately, students nowadays did not engage to one another. It happens mostly to the international students who were coming away from their homeland to this country, Malaysia, in particular (Nurul Farhanah et. al., 2016). Most of them did not feel belonging to the university's environment and feel alienated with the community. With that reason, it also hinders this host community, the international students, to participate in any volunteer works, like university-community engagement activities. Several challenges have been highlighted in the earlier references and one of the major challenges is difference in socio-cultural practices.

Methodology

This study was conducted in one of the private university at Cheras, Selangor using in-depth interviews which is one of the qualitative method. At the beginning of interview session, the respondents were given interview guide and consent form since it is volunteer participation information gathered ensured be treated confidentially. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. To get the respondents in this in-depth interview, the purposive

sampling was been used. The researcher has virtually chose this type of sampling as it fit the specific objectives outline by the researchers. According to Palys (2008), purposive sampling was used in research as it does not focus on the central tendency of larger group but to particular group of people. In this study, the "particular group of people" refers to the international students of this private university. The researchers also used this sampling as it focus on criterion sampling (Palys, 2008: 697). For this paper, several criteria such as nationality, years living in Malaysia and knowledge about participation in university-community engagement activities were used as reference. Five respondents of international undergraduate students agreed to participate in the in-depth interview. With different nationalities, such as Germany, Egypt, Palestine, Sri Lanka and Qatar, these respondents were selected based on their years of living in Malaysia. This is due to the fact that the longer they have been in Malaysia, there is big tendencies for them to understand the culture of Malaysian which may encourage them to participate in university-community engagement activities. To complete the findings of this study, thematic analysis is used, where according to Braun and Clark (2006), this method comprises of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns found from the data. Thematic analysis is one of the appropriate way to discover themes using interpretation of data. This technique helps in giving understanding and collecting various aspects of data collection. For this study, the researchers has taken the processes illustrated in the below figure:
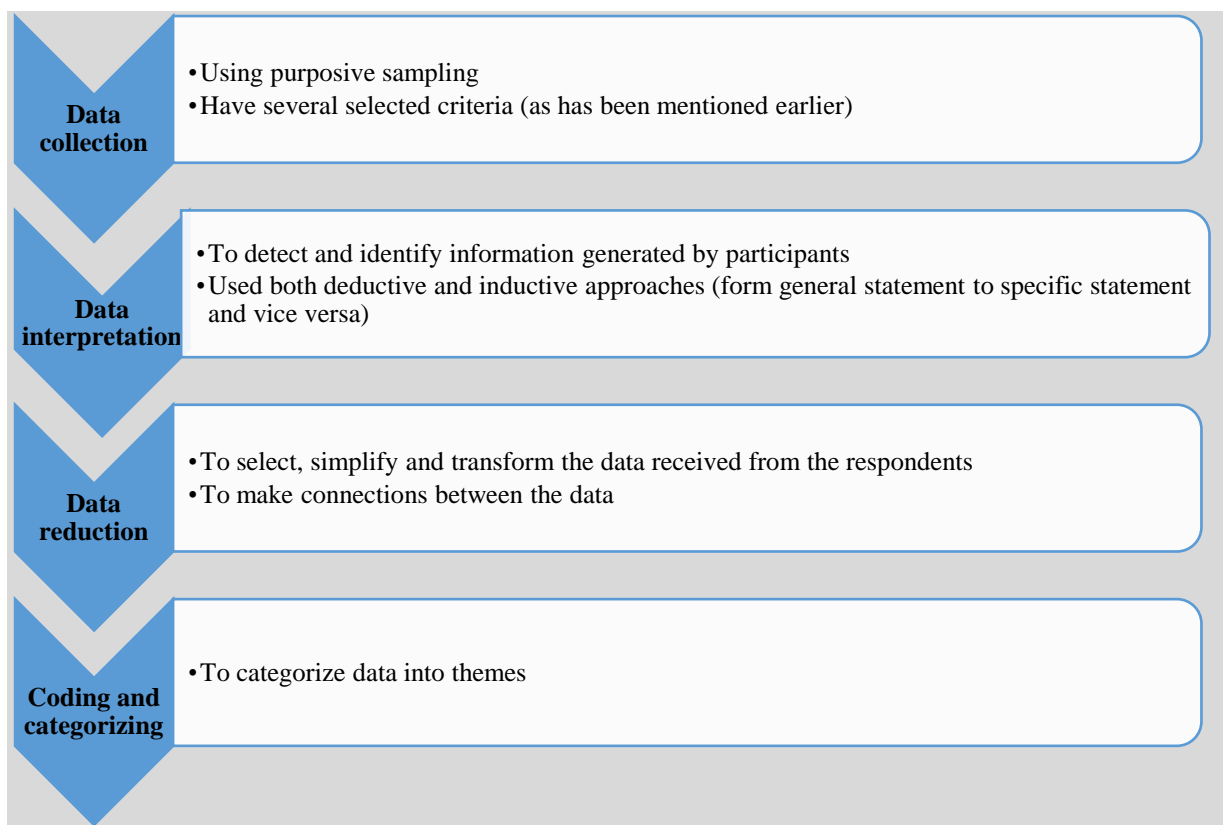
Data collection
- Using purposive sampling
- Have several selected criteria (as has been mentioned earlier)

Data interpretation
- To detect and identify information generated by participants
- Used both deductive and inductive approaches (form general statement to specific statement and vice versa)

Data reduction
- To select, simplify and transform the data received from the respondents
- To make connections between the data

Coding and categorizing
- To categorize data into themes

Figure 1: Process of thematic analysis taken in this study.

With these processes, it is important for researchers to make sure the findings is valid and reliable. Thus, the stage of data interpretation need to undergo a thorough process and it took around six months (January 2017 – June 2017) to complete this paper before the researchers produced the results and findings.

Results

There are two important questions have been asked to the respondents in dealing with this issue. The questions entails about the general knowledge about university-community engagement activities and its challenges.

General knowledge about university-community engagement activities

This study found that all respondents have heard about university-community engagement where its either they call it as "volunteer work" or "social work". The usage of different terms to illustrate about what is university-community engagement activities has been mentioned by Sawasdikosol (2009), where based on his findings, it depends on the usage of terms in their particular country but the objectives remain the same; which is to offer volunteer activities to the needy. This literature confirms the different usage of terms found in this study, yet still carries the same objective. With the findings in this study, it shows that respondents are all aware about the existence of this activity during their student-life. However, when it comes to the experiences in participating in this activity, only two of them has participated doing this volunteer work at their own country. This is due to the fact of accessibility and their willingness to participate in university-community engagement activities in their own country. With the encouragement of helping their own community, they did not hesitate to help the people. Nevertheless, three of them hesitant to participate even at their own country. One respondent mentioned that since she is a female, the society did not encourage them (the female) to participate in outdoor activities because it does not look nice. This findings has been mentioned by Nurul Farhanah et. al. (2016) where one of the challenges that makes students abstain from doing outdoor activities is due to the social and cultural barriers. Looking at this findings, this study aimed at finding the challenges faced by international undergraduate students in doing university-community engagement activities at their private university, particularly in Malaysia.

Challenges for international students in participating the university-community engagement activities

This study found that there are two main challenges which hinder international students from participating in this beneficial activities which are; (i) time constraint and commitment; and (ii) cultural and language barriers.

(i)   Time constraint and commitment
        This study found that four respondents mentioned that they are having problems when it comes to time management. Since their visas as a student in Malaysia is very limited, they have to put their commitment for study as their priority. This issue has made them having a time constraint to join any volunteer activities which are not included in their student's activity. Respondents commonly answered that they need to finish their studies as early as they can because it cost them a lot of money if they have to extend years of studies here. Hence, to avoid that problems, they would rather focus on finishing their studies and fulfill their commitment as a student.

        I know that everyone will have the same issue, which is time constraint especially when it comes to do volunteer works, everybody seems like avoiding this activity. But, that is not the issue. We have some difficulty. Hmm (buffer)… Even though

most of us aware that this activity is good, however, with time constraints, we have to put our study as our priority. Otherwise, we have to bear with the unnecessary costs. We have a lot of things to settle. Some of us need to do part-time work to pay our tuition fees while some were very busy with classes. Due to this problem, many of us choose not to participate in this university-community engagement activities. (Respondent from Sri Lanka)

Due to the fact of this issue, most of the international students refused to participate in university-community engagement activities. Contrast to one respondent from Germany, he mentioned that despite of time constraint and commitment, he sees this activity as part of his mission to know about other cultures.

Some of the students may see this as a hard thing. For me, I have this believe; if you are willing to do something, there is no reason for you to avoid or not doing it. Thus, for me, as it is a fun activity, I will try my very best to allocate some time to participate in this activity, at least once per semester. What motivates me? Umm… maybe because my girlfriend is Malaysian [laugh], and I love to know different cultures here. It is different from my country (Germany). (Respondent from Germany)

Looking at the benefits mentioned by the respondents, this study believes that students are actually aware about the benefit of university community engagement activities. Yet, due to the reason such as loaded by student's priority, they have to abandon this beneficial activity from part of their student-activity.

(i)   *Cultural and Language Barriers*

Another limitation which caused the international students not to participate in university-community engagement activities is cultural and language barriers. This study found that all respondents mentioned that they always have cultural and language obstacles. They always have a problem while communicating with people when they go out from the university.

It is not an issue to communicate with other nationalities in this university. But it turn differently when we try to communicate with outsiders. Let say, my friends and I go to stall by Muslim-Indian, we sometimes had problem to say what we want to eat because not all of them (the stall worker) can speak in English. My English also not that good because our native language is Arabic language. So, I am thinking of what will happen if I dare to go to remote areas like *kampung* (*village*)? I believe that will bring more problems. (Respondent from Qatar)

With this particular incidents, most of them refused to participate in this activity because it involves local people.

At one time, I did follow my Malaysian friends to see them communicate with the local Chinese people at Chinese restaurant. That is my first Chinese restaurant, sitting with Chinese group of people. Then, they ask me to eat using chopstick. Well, obviously, that is my first time to use it (chopstick) so I took some time to finish my food. Even though at first they tease me, but later, they taught me how to use it. So, sometimes, learning different cultures also need us to be patient. How about if I agreed to go to village to help the villagers? Can I

adapt with that kind of situation? I wish to offer some helps to them, yet I am the one who need help from the villagers. [Laugh] (Respondent from Egypt)

This is also agreed by the Germany students who were actively participating in university-community engagement activities in Malaysia. Meanwhile, the only female student from Palestine mentioned that she does not have an intention to participate in any volunteer activities because at their places, female were not encouraged to do outdoor activities. Thus, to remain the same practices, she tries to avoid any activities like this.

Discussion and recommendation

Based on the findings, it shows that university-community engagement among international students need improvement. The benefit of being a participant in community activities has to be stressed out. Even though this study only provides five respondents which fall under limitation of the study, it clearly shows some issues to be part of the discussion especially by the institution because they are the one who are responsible to produce a quality students. According to Wilson (2009) in his study, community engagement can facilitates to the acquisition of interpersonal skills and positive social norms, membership in pro-social peer groups, and stronger emotional and social connections to one's school. In addition, the student have to know the reason of participation may contribute to an increase of wellness in mental health, improved students' engagement in school and achievement, strengthen their long-term educational outcomes and find that participation may decrease problem behaviours. Thus, several steps can be taken by a higher learning institution to encourage participation among international students. One of the approaches is by providing them with peer mentor students together. It helps students to become familiar with the universities, academic as well as the communities. Another role can be played by the Student Representative Council to organize functions which attract participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds to facilitate the international students so that they will not feel alienated to engage in any university-community engagement activities. Further, student at the university level has to be enlightened that community service activities play a significant role for their employability opportunity especially in sharping their skills. By involving in such activities, it can develop communication and soft skill, high confidence level and care as well as concern of young generation towards the community.

As mentioned earlier, this study does have limitation, especially in its number of respondents. In future, number of respondents should be more and the study on the strategies for effective community-engagement among international students in term of the management and evaluation can be carried out. With this recommendation, it is hoped that the urge for students to be part of the Malaysian community can be achieved.

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