Students Service-Learning Experience and Perception of Graduate Preparedness for The Workplace

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Abstract
Effective graduate employability and graduates lack of preparedness for the workforce has been the topic for discourse by employers and scholars. It has been widely debated and discussed on academic platforms and forums in light of new survey findings that indicate an acute deficiency in highly essential attributes such as graduate's problem-solving ability and exposure to real-world scenarios. This is a considerably significant issue that impacts the future of our nations human resource development through unresolved unemployment issue. Thus, this research serves to suggest for service-learning courses to be adapted in the Malaysian higher education institutions as a means to address some of the deficiencies in graduate readiness. The study indicates how service-learning courses can expose students to real-world social issues and ultimately enhance work-readiness through broadening currently demanded skill sets. Undergraduate students in a service-learning course across three semesters from a local private university were asked feedback through a survey on how they felt about the course and how much it could aid potential graduates in specific areas. Additionally, comments from reflective forms were also captured for the qualitative component of this study. Findings reveal that students perceived the service-learning course positively despite being a mandatory general studies unit and gained useful demonstrative attributes in the service-learning process for future employment, indicating that the exposure and experience added value to their professional development. The contribution of this study would be highly beneficial to the consideration of service-learning programs in university to replace basic community service programs to thoughtfully incorporate professional

development outcomes and serve as a practical training ground so graduates are better equipped for the demands of the current workplace.

Keywords: Service-learning, Graduate Preparedness, Undergraduates Training, Employability

Inroduction

There are a host of modern approaches being introduced to higher education as universities local and abroad embrace the challenge of churning student learners into employers of the 21st century. These approaches are often studied, discussed, experimented on and researched to great lengths all in the name of good and effective practices of education; from digital or technology-abled ventures to streams of collaborative learning. There is an approach that appears to be gaining much popularity across the globe in higher education institutions (HEIs). Service-learning (SL) is widely defined as a form of experiential education that integrates meaningful community service into the curriculum (Preradovic, 2016) and is concisely known as 'a pedagogy that combines academic study with service to the community' (Deely,2014). Service-learning meaningfully facilitates students to emerge from the theoretical world to the world of practice by linking community-service with academic content through learning objective (Rusu et al., 2015). It is a promising and rewarding learning approach that capitalizes experiential learning, making connections with community partners and structured reflection with practical means by addressing   real-life social and community issues with a purpose of making some social impact.

Service-learning has received due attention and recognition as an integral part in Asian curriculum for higher learning institutions. From the South East Asian perspective, Kung and Liu (2018) asserts how higher education communities have realized that traditional approaches of narrow-focused, highly competitive, and exam-based outcomes, discourages some students from completing their degree. Recognizing the immense potential as an educational tool, service-learning emerged as part of the Malaysian Higher Education Strategic Plan as a significant response to create graduates who are holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced, becoming an integral experiential practice in HEIs (Yusof et al., 2018).

Undergraduates are often exposed to more structured learning occurring within the walls of the higher education institutions they belong to. Although a traditionally proven approach all around the world, there has been a rise in practice for academicians to connect classroom learning with the outside world through various means. As exposure and experience, also known as the 'X-factors' are increasingly becoming the focal point at employment interviews, academic leaders have made a paradigm shift in teaching and learning pedagogy. This includes emphasis on more industry liaisons, to integrate career talks by professionals, visits to companies, emphasize extracurricular involvement to support academic outcomes and internship programs as assessments move to more practical outreach as well. No longer is tertiary education delivering the mere function to educate students in order to create knowledgeable people but it now comes with the natural expectation of producing employable graduates for the industry (Reeve & Gallacher, 2005; Yorke, 2006). Hence, skill development and employment is considered as the pivotal role of higher learning institutions to prepare undergraduates for the working (Murdoch, 2004; Evans, 2008).

Besides delivery and pedagogy, the expectations on the potential graduates have also evolved. The notion that 'experience is the best teacher', is gradually gaining truth as the

mode of learning in higher education institutions evolve to stimulate more expanded and tangible learning outcomes from students. Reality is that students who shut themselves from the outside world to stay in the 'safe comfort zone' minimize their chances in securing gainful employment in the competitive job-seeking environment upon graduation. Malaysian employers have reportedly lamented that graduates lack the suitable skills and qualifications required by the industry and there is a strong relationship between graduate attributes, employability skills and career mismatch (Hossain et al., 2018). Hanapi and Nordin (2013) stated from the Central Bank of Malaysia (2002) study conclusions, the international graduates have higher employability compared to the Malaysian graduates in terms of the skills which include but not limited to technical skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills. Malaysian employers are still lamenting that the graduates streaming into employment lack communication skills, analytical skills, and critical thinking (Cheong, Fernandez-Chung and Leong, 2016). The companies that hire graduates despite these shortcomings may have to spend more in training and up-skilling them just so they could adjust to the current 'employment culture'. Thus, it is appropriate to expect educational institutions to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge (Singh & Singh, 2008) and aim for effective skills training which will produce graduates who are skillful before entering the work force (Hossain et al.,2018). All these concerns have activated an ongoing process of scrutiny; from the employers actively providing official feedback of inadequate graduate skills, researches publishing studies on this, career counselors responding to this in their action plans and academicians infusing specific skills to make their students more employable.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) had accentuated the significance of service-learning and experiential learning as a key educational platform in developing 21st century skills but there is a need to explore on it's potential in the Malaysian context. Conventionally, community related courses have been popular in tertiary education but conducted with much limited scope and reach. For that reason, its prospect was very often underestimated till service-learning practitioners broadened and crystalized the features of community engagement from mere community service. With this expanded view of service-learning that includes connecting with various stakeholders to make a social impact to a target community, the enormous potential of service-learning could just be the answer for many student' related concerns at higher education institution. This includes ongoing challenges from retention issues to personal development and even adds to their credentials for career prospects which were highlighted from various researches on service-learning covered later in the literature review. Even with its widespread practice in the US, it was Chupp and Joseph (2010) who brought up that there is often little attention to the intended and actual results of the service learning indicating a deeper examining of service-learning impact. McCarthy et al (2005) affirmed that there is increasing interest among Asian institutions in service learning to expand curriculum exposure to productive service to others. However, there are notably very limited studies from the Malaysian scenario and that which outcomes were captured from actual service-learning courses of a private university from the perspective of the students. Apparently, Wickam (2015) pointed out that service-learning impacting the employability skills of business students is scarce and this study is particularly conducted on business undergraduates. Additionally, there were a number of researches that highlighted the skills attainment of service learning courses but hardly any that linked those attainments of attributes closely with graduate preparedness for the workplace in the current uncertain environment of graduate unemployment. Training is a term for up-skilling that is synonymous

to employee development as part of the employment journey. Thus, the notion of service-learning as a potential training platform to prepare graduates for the current workplace scenario in Malaysia appears inadequate. There are a few international papers that suggest linking and using service-learning as a training ground to achieve a specified purpose for undergraduates especially in areas of psychology, counseling, teaching and geography (Smith et al., 2011; Toporek & Worthington, 2014) and an interesting study by Roos et al (2005) where service-learning was referred to as a 'training model' with applied service-learning insights on practical activities that tested on across different disciplines. Azmi et al (2018) considers the invested implications of training graduates for both the government and companies and that this approach of retraining graduate programs/plans have indeed triggered dismal results and incurred a tremendous cost. Therefore, it is a proposed notion in this paper that training of undergraduates for specific outcomes can happen prior to graduation through the exposure of service-learning courses.

Serving to understand student's perception and acceptance of such an approach is crucial to the consideration of curriculum development. Basically, there is a learning experience through an exposure of addressing community and societal related issues with service-learning courses but this study aims to determine if it is effective in the eyes of the recipients, the students themselves, and whether they feel the impact on aspects of their professional growth.

This study aims to determine the experience and perception of service-learning students on their course explores the extent to which the service-learning approach prepares undergraduates for the workplace. It further serves to speculate whether the course is effective in preparing undergraduates for employment. The paper serves to do this by assessing the perception of service-learning students towards the attainment of awareness of social issues and the extent to which the course provided employability preparedness from six identified graduate attributes standpoint.

Literature Review
Service Learning Concept
The service-learning concept and practice has been defined and discussed with much scope across the years though it revolves around roughly common implications. The earlier definitions were mostly general and referred with non-academic insinuations. Furco (1996) cited Sigmon (1979) that it 'represents the coming together of many hearts and minds seeking to express compassion for others and to enable a learning style to grow out of service". The National Society of Experiential Education identified service-learning as an "experience in which a student has intentional learning goals" (Furco,1996) while Jacoby (1996) states that service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. These definitions are broad in nature and indicate an emphasis on 'learning'. Service-learning definitions begin to employ more specific and direct terms in application as the practice grew more prominent in recent years.

A study on the term by Preradovic (2016) discussed that service-learning definitions can be divided in two main items, the first describes service-learning as a form of education, and the second group of definitions defines SL as an educational philosophy. Rhodes and Davis (2001)

as well Thomson et al (2011) acknowledged that service-learning is a pedagogical strategy that connects students to their communities. Few service-learning researches had made associations between service learning and real-world context, viewing it to be experiential and meaningful education (Simon & Cleary, 2006) as well as contributions to civic responsibility (Hatcher, 1999; Caspersz et al., 2012).

From an educational participative experience to a pedagogical strategy for community contributions to highlighting real world connections and elements of reflection and reciprocity, service-learning is presently understood to go far beyond community service into a world of collaborations and engagement, embedded into course requirements. It is vital however to distinguish service-learning from community service as the above coined definition have stipulated how it represents a more holistic approach of bridging community engagement with classroom learning, while serving to address community needs more strategically with mutually benefitting outcomes and reflection for individuals. Note that volunteerism is hardly used or implied as a synonym to service-learning perhaps simply because pure volunteerism lacks the academic component inherent in service-learning (O'Connor, 2006). Kung and Lui (2018) mentioned that it has specific objectives, involves skills acquisition and critical analysis, that goes beyond the usual volunteering or fundraising. Also noteworthy for this research is the fact that hardly any of the definitions provided include the word 'training' in it. This further accentuates the fact that service-learning as a training mode was hardly explored but remains in the context of service-learning applications in courses and curriculum as a feasible and practical notion.

Service Learning Rewarding Outcomes

Service Learning has been viewed as a blessing by service-learning practitioners, researchers and authors and one that can bring abundant benefits to the undergraduate as evidence accumulates across the years (Clayton et al., 2013, Eyler & Giles, 1999). Studies by the Association of American Colleges and Universities had publicized service-learning as one of the "high-impact educational practices" (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008). Carrington et al (2015,p.62) asserts it as a 'powerful pedagogy that is designed to facilitate transformative learning'

The students are undoubtedly enriched in many ways from service-learning courses and it's intangible but rewarding outcomes. It was revealed that the Academic outcomes of service-learning include increased content knowledge and skills (Prentice & Robinson, 2010), and providing an avenue for civic engagement and social responsibility to be accomplished (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Prentice & Robinson, 2010). McCarthy et al (2015) mentioned that service-learning delivers alternate opportunities in curriculum to encourage students' personal development, social connection, and critical thinking provides Mendel-Reyes (1998) discusses that service-learning creates the opportunity for students to learn how to work in collaboration with the community to induce some social impact by applying formalized learning to problem-solve issues catering to social need. This ultimately, asserts Mendel-Reyes (1998), prospectively engages student learners in transformative learning experience for learners. Furthermore, service-learning has long been associated with instilling a sense of empathy. Empathy can be defined as "the ability to walk in another's shoes". Service-learning is concerned with sociality particular group in the community affected by an existing plight are often very grateful and in need for support. With reference to Lovat &

Clement (2016); Carnegie Corporation (1996), service-learning as a philosophy is as a feature of human development where the nurturing of empathic character is necessary to effective teaching and learning. Apparently, there has been a trend toward declining empathy among tertiary students (Konrath et al., 2011). Chupp and Joseph (2010) cited Bernacki & Jaeger (2008) that students taking service-learning courses recounted becoming more compassionate, having a greater understanding and ability to solve social issues, and a greater propensity to make the world better than students who had not participated in service learning. Hence, service-learning is ideal to infuse and integrate the development of empathy among young people as both a pedagogical and practical approach.

For the HEI's, more active forms of university engagement with surrounding communities offer students an opportunity to actively pursue learning goals experientially while providing them exposure in local cultures and communities. Programmes can be designed to infuse both capability (critical thinking, social interaction, communication) and commitment (responsibility) in students to become social change agents in the long term (Bringle et al., 2011; Deeley, 2014). This means the HEI's would be better in churning out more holistic graduates who would not only have further reach in their career or employment journey but make an impact in society as well in whatever capacity the graduates find themselves in.

Service-learning and graduate preparedness for the workplace
Knight and Yorke (2006, p.3) define employability as, "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

There has been some discussion on the contribution of service-learning to graduates future employment but not many articles with direct focus on graduate or employability preparedness. Ramson (2014) highlighted that colleges have started to assimilate experiential approaches into the curriculum to impart work competencies and goes on to recommend that service-learning is high impact because if facilitates application and testing of academics in a new professional situation. Matthews, Dorfman & Wu (2015) affirmed the service-learning potential influence on post graduate' prospects of employment by investigating the direct associations of service- learning students in the study and their employment outcomes. It was revealed that a higher proportion the graduates across 20 majors with service-learning received full-time employment, higher starting salaries, received raises more quickly which also implied it to be economically valuable.

There are some notable studies that identified service-learning as a catalyst contributing to the attainment of students' various skills and attributes sought after by employers. What is unique about service-learning is the component of the experiential element in service-learning. This has been hypothesized to have outcomes that might result in employment-related benefits (Matthews et al., 2015; Duncan and Taylor, 2013). These various approaches of experiential learning have made it conducive to practical skills attainment. Academic service-learning courses engage students in applying their learning to real-world, community identified problems or issues (Matthews et al., 2013). From the earlier research summary of Eyler et al (2001), service learning was known to have a constructive effect on the ability to work well with others, leadership and communication skills, all which are still relevant skills

employers look for today. Jameson et al (2013) summarized studies connecting to service-learning's influences on academic learning outcomes, particularly to develop higher order thinking skills, application of knowledge, and critical thinking. In her research findings, Wickam (2018) revealed that collaborative learning skills acquired by employers and enhanced in service-learning were aligned. Service-learning has been shown to provide students with more skills that will be helpful in their careers such as teamwork and leadership skills, (Prentice & Robinson, 2010). All these serve multiple purpose of doing good for society but adding to the development and credentials of a student. Some service-learning opportunities may also provide students with direct professional experiences that could make them more competitive as job candidates (Matthews et al., 2015).

Methodology
The scope of this research was focused in a Malaysian private university. To investigate the learning experiences and perception of the service-learning course from the student's perspective, both quantitative and qualitative approaches of research design methods were used in this exploratory research.

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2013) the population refers to the entire group, events, or things of interest that the researcher wishes to look into. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify service-learning students who had gone through the entire course of service-learning as an undergraduate. The target group for this research was the Social Issues and Community Engagement (SICE) students of the Victoria University Business program. Out of the total population of Sunway College students, the sample size for survey and individual reflective comprised 171 undergraduates. The research utilized self-administered questionnaires across three semesters from February 2019 to January 2020 which were completed at the very tail-end of the service-learning module. The students were all 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates from the program where SICE was a mandatory module crafted within the program. The questionnaire was given at the end of the semester to gather feedback on how they perceived the module as it was delivered and how much they think SICE helps potential graduates in six areas of attributes for graduate preparedness which were Project Management, personal development and self-awareness, broad employability skills of communication leadership and teamwork, creative problem solving and critical thinking, emotional intelligence and networking. The questionnaire contained eight questions of open ended, close-ended and five-point likert-scale questions. Only six questions were analyzed for this research.

According to Abdullah (2019), basic qualitative design is conducted to generate an understanding from the data collected and subsequently to be analyzed which is usually in the form of words. The qualitative approach in this study was that open statements were taken from reflective answers by the same service-learning learners who took the survey to ensure consistency and reliability. The individual reflective was conducted at the very last day of their course after the projects were completed and they had presented their service-learning journey. Only a few of these were selected to be used as support in the results and findings. The data were subsequently analyzed and grouped into themes.

Research ethics were adhered to as the respondents were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of responses and only generalized findings were released for report writing.

The objectives of the questionnaires were also explained and the rights of the respondents were respected as there was no coercion. Lincoln & Guba (1985) stated that reliability and validity is an essential factor that needed to be carried out in qualitative research to ensure outcome received make sense they are consistent and dependable. Findings from the qualitative research were purely from students' statements of experience and perception and these were substantiated with secondary research findings from the literature review.

Findings

The understanding of Service Learning module (SICE) and its purpose

As the SICE unit is a compulsory module, an added General studies unit specifically selected and designed by the program, it was essential to know if the students understood the rationale and worth of the module. This was the intent of objective number one of this study. Hence, having an understanding of the module also extends to a comprehension on the purpose of the service-learning course and why they are doing it in the first place. It was reassuring to note that 91.2% (n=156) of them stated that they understood what service-learning is about. It is implied that the students are not resisting the module despite being forced in their curriculum to complete it. The initial informal response from students on the first day of the course is that a majority admitted to taking up the module simply because it was mandatory and hence, they 'had no choice'. This feedback was collected at the end of semester and thus the general perception of the module has shifted to more positive impressions. However, it had little indication on whether the business students saw relevance of the module to their course though they acknowledge its worth.
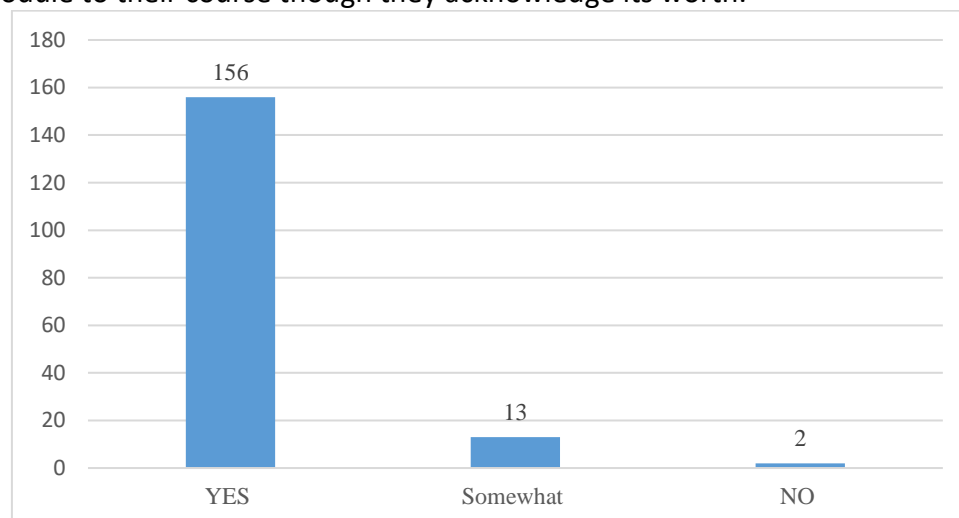

Figure 1: Understanding of Service-Learning Module

Assessment of students learning experience for module content

In reference to objective two of this research, the students were asked to rate their experience of the module in terms of weekly content. SICE in-class learning covers various social issues and societal concerns to which students are made aware of and involve themselves in understanding the implications surrounding those issues. The understanding is reinforced with experiential learning activities where participation is encouraged.

The findings reveal that the students also appeared to receive the various weekly topics and associated activities fairly well with 44.4% (n=76) of them saying that it was excellent and

46.2% (n=79) stating it was good. Only one stated poor while there were 8.7 (n=15) students who found it just satisfactory.
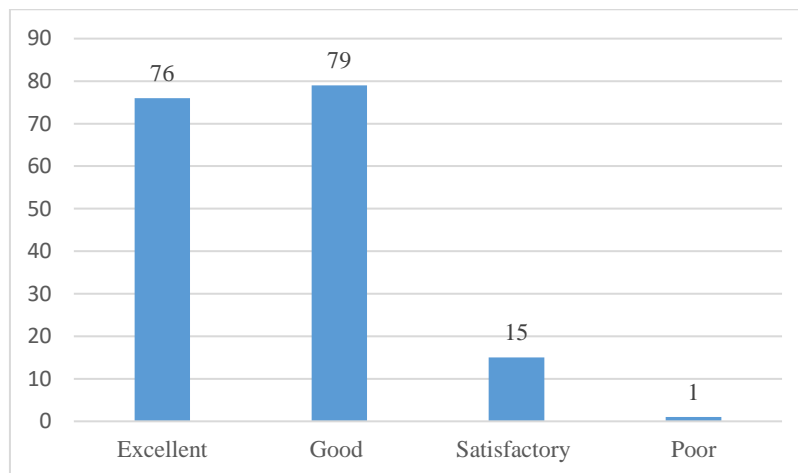

Figure 2: Rating of Service-Learning Experience in Terms of Weekly Topics and Activities

Evaluation of students learning experience in this module in terms of assessment
Also, in relation to objective two of this study, the students were asked to assess their experience in aspects of the assessments, bearing in mind that the module has no exam and is a 100 percent accumulative coursework. The students main and major assessment was to plan and execute a project that would address a community need to create social impact. Groups of 7-8 students have to produce a proposal for social impact which is 25% of the marks and then execute the improved project to which their final multimedia presentation of the implementation is awarded 40%. Each student then does an individual reflection amounting to 15%.

The results reported that 39.1% (n =67) of them indicated it to be Excellent while 46.2% (n=79) stated that it is good while 13.5% (n=23) found it satisfactory while no one stated their experience to be 'poor'. The project-based assignment is thus fairly well received and safe to say that students mostly accepted the way they are assessed in this module.
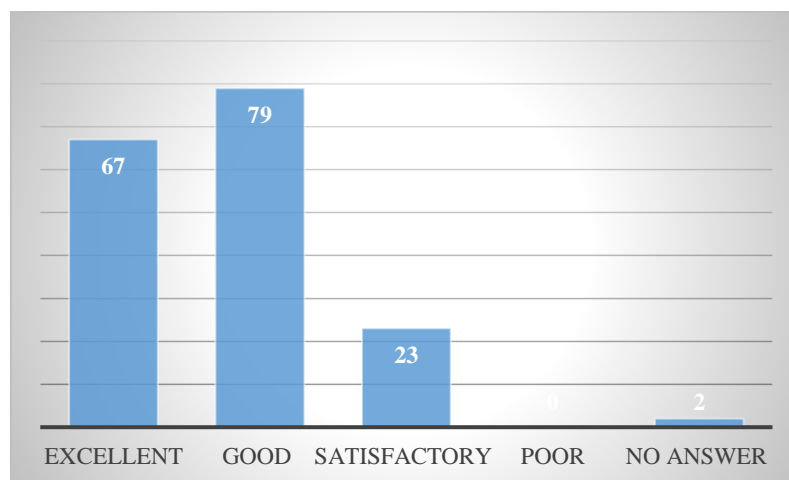

Figure 3: Rating of Service-Learning Experience in Terms of Assessments

What students looked forward to from the course

This question was asked so the lecturer could explore parts in the delivery or content that could be given more emphasis in future according to the feedback received. It was pertinent to also find out what particular aspects of the course was appealing to them and whether they saw a connection with their personal or professional development. There was not much disparity between the results for this question. Although most 29% did not answer, it was revealed that the involvement in activities was something they looked forward to weekly 22% and learning new insights 14% particularly in social current issues 17%.

About 17% of them mentioned that the topics itself that kept them coming and this could be attributed to the service-learning syllabus being updated to current themes that explore issues of the urban poor, *Cyberbulllying*, diversity challenges, acceptance, mental health etc. Students are also asked to give feedback personally to the lecturer on issues they feel strongly about so it can surface in class.
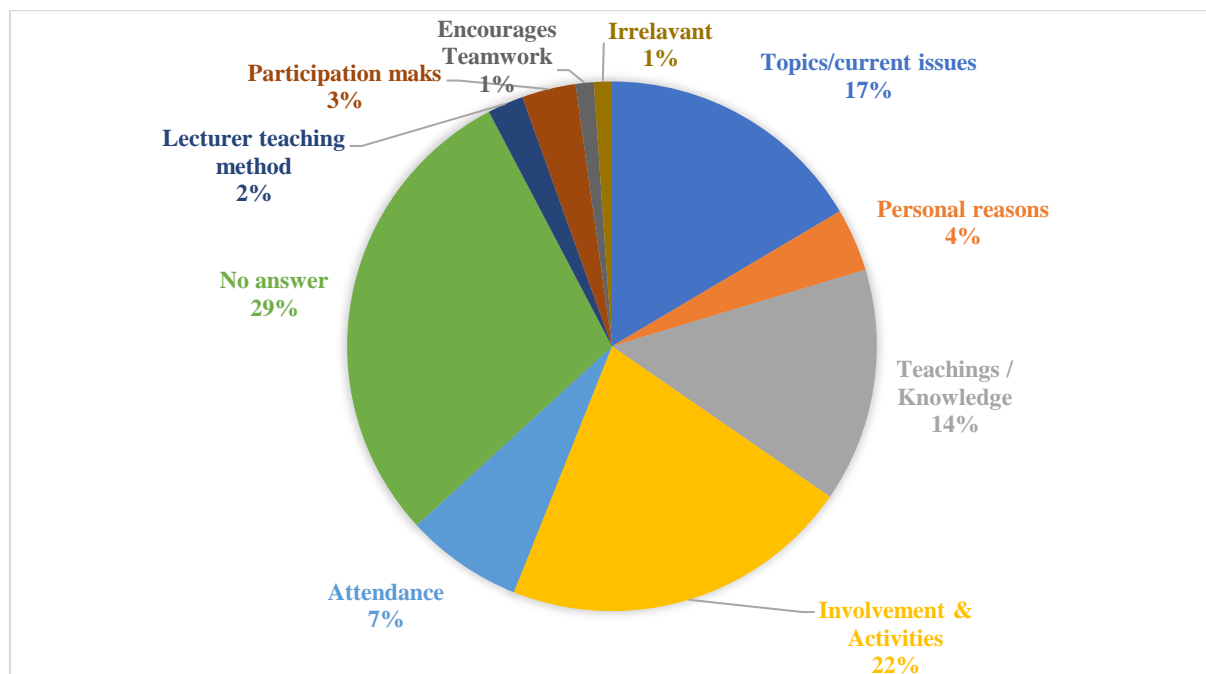

Figure 4: Feedback on what kept the Students Coming for Weekly Sessions

Students Awareness of Social Issues

In relation to Objective 3 of this research, this question was posed to the students to determine if they felt their awareness, insights and knowledge of various societal issues, locally and globally, has been enhanced with the completion of the course. It has been highlighted that there is a lack of emphasis on general knowledge especially among Malaysian students. Lee et al (2014) cited from Chew (2013) that graduates who are interviewed for jobs show inadequate core knowledge and competency and insufficient general knowledge. It is important for graduates to not appear ignorant to the world's issues especially when a lot of companies are engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals and attempting to provide solutions to some social concerns.

The vast majority of students, 85.3% (n=146) from SICE had agreed that they became more aware of certain social issues after the experience of the service-learning course. This implied that their knowledge on social issues had been enhanced through the weekly sessions.
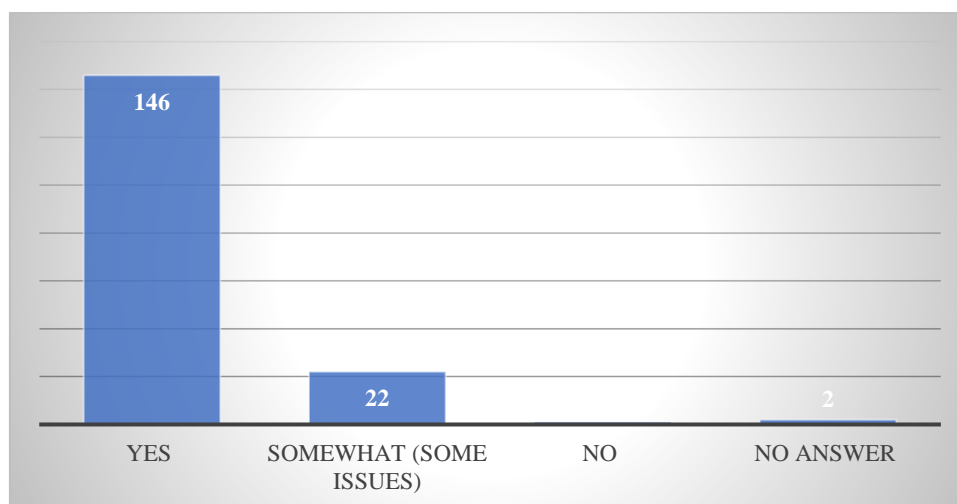

Figure 5: Students Expression of Awareness on Certain Social Issues After Going Through the Service-Learning Course

The extent of service-learning experience on graduate preparedness
Students were given a *likert* scale question to assess the extent of their perception on how helpful they thought the service-learning course could prepare them for the workforce through six classifications of recognizable attributes. From the broad spectrum of desirable graduate attributes, these specific aspects were broken down into distinct areas. The likert scale of 5 indicating that the module was most helpful in preparing graduates and 1 being not helpful. It was found that for all the aspects listed, the students rated the highest was on 4 and then 5 (very helpful), which indicated the student perceived that the service-learning course they experienced was helpful to a larger extent in facilitating them to be work-ready.

Among the 6 identifiable areas, the one which indicated highest in the very helpful category (rating 5) is Emotional Intelligence (EI) with 43.2% (n=74) students highlighting the service-learning course to be very helpful in developing their EI. The service-learning course emphasized empathy and self-awareness through reflection and these outcomes was an aspect that most academic modules in the business program scarcely produced. Students are able to see and feel the difference of service-learning being unique in that manner. The results supported literature above where Chupp & Joseph (2010) cited Bernacki & Jaeger (2008) that students taking service-learning courses recounted becoming more compassionate. Carnegie Corporation (1996) postulated that the nurturing of empathic character is a foundational characteristic of effective learning while Nicols (2015) motioned in her thesis that service-learning impacted on developing cross-cultural empathy. These are valuable attributes to possess in workforce especially in business for client or customer relationship and retention. The second highest that the students found to be 'very helpful' was in the category of creative problem solving and critical thinking, attributed employers place high regard for. This will be discussed further in the discussion part of this research.
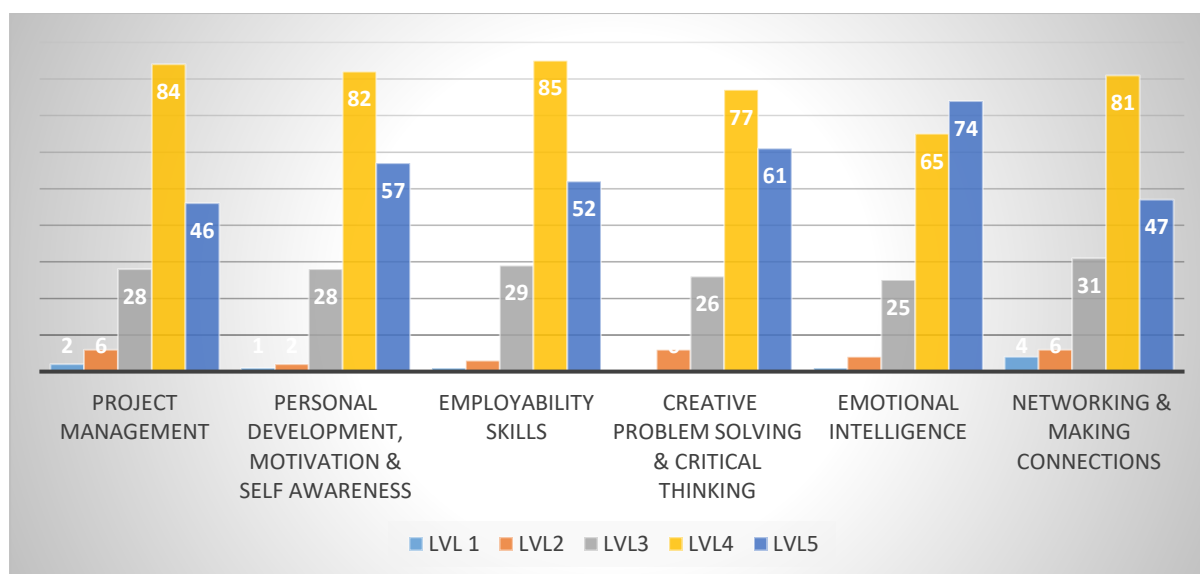
Figure 6: Students Perception on the Extent of Service-Learning Being Helpful to Prepare them for the Workforce in Terms of Specific Areas of Graduate Attributes

Qualitative findings of students perception on service-learning

To dive in deeper into the students' perception on service-learning outcomes, students open-ended responses were captured to gain more insight on aspects they felt they had attained in the service-learning process. Common themes were identified and keywords were captured from the individual reflective forms. Students were mostly asked on what they learnt or gained from the entire service-learning experience and how they can apply what they learnt in their future. Some students would refer to their personal development and growth while most would be able to articulate how specific aspects and how they see themselves transferring these areas at the workforce. The following are the common themes to which the data from the responses were grouped.

Resilience

The responses in the findings show that students needed to persevere when facing challenges in their project progress. They mentioned they had to work under pressure managing their members, community partners, the affected community and sometimes the university facilities management for resources. Giving up when there were setbacks were not an option as there were too many stakeholders involved and they had to see it through.

Problem-solving

The findings reveal that the students gained from exposure to situations that needed them to be resourceful and solution-oriented. They felt that it molded their mental strength in problem solving as they faced constraints and restrictions in their projects such as rejections from NGOs or conflict of different views and opinions from own members on the better approach. As creativity is an expected requirement of their project, creative problem solving and critical thinking often became a natural by-product of groups facing such challenges.

Self-awareness

The findings demonstrate a heighten sense of self-awareness during the service-learning experience. Students found that they needed to alter their fixed mindset and come out of their comfort zone. This was evident in weekly sessions of experiential learning and from their

initial fearful perception or hesitance on approaching certain community groups such as HIV or refugees. Yet, at the end of the experience they noted that it was a chance to educate and improve themselves. It was commented that through leading a project, one gained confidence in their capabilities.

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence
The students mentioned that they gained empathy, especially for causes that they felt numb to before. As they reached out to affected and struggling communities, they were more acceptable to others who are different.

Interpersonal Skills
There were statements from students on how the service learning experience enhanced their interpersonal skills as they learnt to make connections and engage with people outside of the university as well as to interact with those from different background beyond their usual familiar circle.

Social Consciousness
Students revealed that they were inspired to make a change and went beyond the grade of the project because of that. They were willing to speak up when someone misunderstands a disadvantaged community or when change was needed to become a positive force or change makers.

The reflective responses shed light and aided to scrutinize the specific aspects that the students could recognized as a gain from the course. All the above attributes mentioned by students and if displayed or demonstrated in a fellow graduate is bound to make employers delighted to invest in a potential employee. Students will have more to share about particular learning moments from their project exposure or as a conversation piece at interviews to sustain employers' interest. This is especially beneficial for those students with very little or no work experience.

Discussion
Students motivation, attitude and mindset
According to Ng and Burhanuddin (2017), the General studies modules were introduced to increase the quality of human capital to produce more holistic graduates. Otherwise known as the MPU units, SICE is crafted by academics within respective academic program and made mandatory for all students. Hence, it was imperative for the sake of effectiveness, that the service-learning course under General studies delivers its purpose aligned with the students' capacity to rationalize the module as one that is needed and not just another compulsory unit. As the results in this study showed that majority of the students recognized the relevance of the module, this is a positive step in the right direction. For service-learning students who are not used to the unique mode of experiential and reflective learning from the service -learning course, they might show some reluctance initially especially when it challenges their comfort zone. However, the results for the 2nd and 3rd question indicate that influencing the learning attitude of the student learners is important since the results show their receptiveness to service-learning is enhanced through the weekly session topics and practical assessment. Individual responses from the reflective revealed the students shared the same sentiment about their comfort zones and in changing mindsets. This supports the

above two results on how favorable the students perceive the course to be despite the different sort of work that they would need to commit to. According to Wittmerr (2004), students may not realise the impact they created or that they can affect change till personal and social outcomes have been proven to impact students, positively affecting students' sense of personal satisfaction

The lecturer used training modes and experiential learning with high degree of interaction and exchanging of views, emphasizing individual participation to influence the level of motivation. The module has a high participation mark component which is 20% of the cohort as a component and this is so learning could be demonstrated instead of just captured. Only then can it be transferred with value to the future workplace. Workman and Berry (2011) put forth that among many merits of service-learning, it fosters stronger student engagement and increases relevance of teaching and learning. Students are exposed to current social concerns and are prompted to produce for feasible and creative solutions.

Investing in students personal development of self-awareness, perseverance and problem-solving

In terms of *involvement* which seemed to be the more popular vote for gain according to the findings of this study, the more the students are actively involved in their project causes and the course activities carried out in class, the more they could experience the module outcomes. Perhaps it is because service-learning can stimulate student's interest in learning through their immersion in productive service to others (Mc Carthy et al., 2015). Also, as much as we propose the benefits of service-learning to the students' future workplace readiness, it is vital to explore effective methods in delivery of content so students see the relevance and experience those benefits. A leading practice in this course was to personalize the reflection so students can internalize their learning experience effectively. This was evident in the comments from the reflective that students gained a greater or deeper sense of self-awareness or when they realise the course was influential in their confidence or character building. Particular qualities that employers desire in their future staff team is not just to surpass the interview and recruitment stage but specific attributes that could sustain new hires with the tenacity to embrace and survive workplace challenges. These specific notable qualities as the spark that shows both potential and promise is what matters to employers. Nadarajah (2020) in a comprehensive study of employability affirmed from her findings that the graduates feel they are able to understand problems and collect facts, however they are still not confident in analyzing and finding solutions on their own. Students comments on the service learning outcomes gained, persevering in the face of pressure and mental strength demonstrate maturity and resilience, both key catalyst to approaching problem solving, also a highly attainable attribute from service-learning exposure as noted in the quantitative findings. Hence, it would make more sense to pronounce a clearer link on their receptiveness of the module, it's nature and outcomes with their future work for service-learning to be considered an operative training platform.

Enhancing skill sets and competencies for effective employability

Employability is a multi-faceted and 'multi-dimensional concept' (Lees, 2002, p.2) Employability skills here in this study particularly refer to soft skills such as interpersonal communication, leadership and teamwork which the students rated rather high despite acquiring these skills from other modules in the business program. The results of this research

affirmed a substantial number felt that service-learning improved these skill sets. These skills were separated from the 21st century skills in this study. According to recent updated research on employability skills (Nadarajah, 2020; Humburg and Van der Velden, 2017) creative problem solving and critical thinking made up the focus of 21st century skills to this study revealed a significant number rating helpful and very helpful in their attainment of these from service-learning course. This was also echoed from the reflective comments where there was attention to specific skill attainment. Omar and Rajoo (2016) declared that graduates are found to be lacking in various skills and knowledge such as communication, soft skills and problem-solving skills and this reality is being felt and realized by undergraduates in the service-learning program when the students themselves see the crucial need for attaining such skill sets to make them employable. Hossain et al (2018) affirmed that soft skills are massive factors in acquisition of entry-level graduates, and students from Malaysian universities seem to lack in those areas even when these 21st century skills are applicable across jobs of various industries. Studies have shown that students learn a skill best by having the primary responsibility for employing that skill to accomplish a task that they can see from start to finish (Kruse, 2002). Nadarajah (2020) amplifies the need that the graduates should take more effort to learn and adapt skills and competencies that are required by in the current job market and consider the mismatch of employability skills between the graduates and job market requirements. She identified that graduates would still need to improve their communication, problem-solving and analytical skill. This is very much about self-investment and if universities were to provide such avenues for them to do so, the effects could be transformative.

Realities of a More Global Outlook
Ramson (2014) highlighted that service-learning has emerged as a significant approach because its intrinsic characteristics that enable students to rapidly transfer college education to practice and develop global proficiency. Through service-learning, bringing in scenarios and cases from reality for students to discuss, debate and discourse mindfully can expose students to various viewpoints and fresh perspectives which is a welcome asset for the working world. Students need to have an outside world-view of various issues and not just equip themselves with technical, academic or industry knowledge. It has also been proclaimed by researchers that students must be prepared to become lifelong learners to gain the skills and knowledge required for our modern knowledge society (Yusof et al., 2018). Sternberg (2013) had acknowledged surveys of employers in the business and nonprofit sectors that revealed besides competencies of critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, intercultural skills, "applied knowledge in real-world settings" top the list of attributes employers seek. Through module expectations of networking and making connections in this course, the students are highly expected to be independent and resourceful in their search for expertise from NGOs, social purpose organizations, social workers, relevant to their cause. As they seek out contacts, face rejections, correspond professionally and develop questions to interview and gain insights on the background of the issue, they are already associating with the real-world.

Service-learning a training platform through social consciousness
Both the quantitative results and the open-ended comments indicate there are inherent merits of the course being delivered as a training ground for work readiness as much as it delivers the meaningful learning outcomes developing social consciousness. McCarthy et al

(2005) highlighted the early signs of Asian universities curriculum expansion to include exposure to personal development, social connection and critical thinking. The comments from students are on either enhancing their self-awareness, empathy or their confidence levels in making connections, skills of communication or interpersonal skills and other relevant areas which are highly valued by employers as the literature review suggests.

It is apparent that employers are looking beyond the traditional CV for some evidence of talents and strengths. Bourner and Milican (2011) asserts that a student' CV claims a vast range of abilities and strengths, and substantiation to support such claims, is relatively in a stronger position to compete in the graduate labour market. Service-learning is a demonstration of such well-sought-after qualities and committed students who go through the experiential process effectively, is able to articulate their knowledge distilled from the experience is a true testament of notable attributes especially when experience matters. Among the distinct attributes delivered uniquely from service-learning courses are self-knowledge, reflective thinking and strategic thinking, proactivity and commitment. More significantly, service-learning is a catalyst for empowerment so young people can feel and ultimately hold on to the fact that they can affect positive change. This itself has vast implications on organization and the nation.

Conclusion

From the findings above, it affirms the speculation that service-learning could be viewed more formally as an internal training to equip potential graduates to be more prepared for work, give them exposure and better face the challenging working world ahead. The business undergraduate students themselves see the positive impact it brings, not just to the community but to their development and credentials. This is particularly in areas of emotional intelligence, skills attainment, critical and creative problem solving and networking. It also reportedly made them more self-aware which is an integral feature for hire for workplace maturity. Some of these were captured in their reflective statements and the comments on the survey forms. However, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the researcher only studied on business undergraduates. It would be interesting to see if the service-learning course would be viewed favorably across different disciplines. It would also be good to explore deeper correlations with demographic factors such as gender and whether they are local or foreign students.

As a way forward, more university courses in Malaysia from Diploma to Degree should consider infusing Service-learning within curriculum as hailed by Sandaran (2012) that higher education institutions in Malaysia would greatly benefit by incorporating service-learning in their courses. To not dismiss the fact that students from any faculty and specialization could utilize their inherent talents, gained knowledge and abilities in Service-Learning courses to address society's pressing issues. However, it is absolutely vital to do so with constant dialogue, creating relationships with community partners that could benefit or add value to the program and scrutinizing what works best for training content and delivery. For this, service-learning practitioners who are academicians need to be resourceful and have be open to experiment with different approaches, sometimes in a 'non-academic' but personalized manner.

The draw of employment encourages young job seekers to view their educations as launching-pads for jobs in global corporations, businesses or international organizations

(McCarthy, 2002). In this day and time, when there are a host of pressing societal issues faced by the community, it is a given for business graduates, whether entering the corporate world or venturing into start-ups, to learn to balance people, profit and planet by providing possible solutions. Huge corporations like *HSBC, DIGI* and *Delloite* have extensive plans through the establishments of divisions looking into sustainability from education to the environment. When students who developed an empathetic, altruistic and socially conscious graduate mindset, exposed to solution-driven initiatives beyond corporate social responsibility, the opportunities for recruitment and further advancement in the company are promising. However, they as fellow undergraduates would need to start somewhere, to see the bigger picture and to build this capacity to serve by developing personally and professionally through service learning. Abdul Hamid et al (2014) attests that graduates' preparation is absolutely vital prior to joining the employment market and besides involvement in co-curricular activities, training and development programmes can enhance a graduates' competence.

Employers often assess a graduate from the lenses of 'worth and value' and the crucial decision on whether they wish to take a chance on a fellow graduate lies on whether the companies wish to invest on them. Graduates step into a competitive world as job seekers with the brand or package they represent and thus investing time and effort on self would certainly give one a competitive edge. Hinhcliff and Jolly (2011) highlights the concept of the 'graduate identity' which was explained as encompassing values, intellect, performance and end engagement. From the research above, it pronounces that service-learning courses in higher education institutions for all its intent and purposes is well received by service-learning learners and thus can be exploited for the enormous potential it represents as a strategic method to produce holistic and assured graduates.

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