Benchmarking Unstructured Community Service Against the National SULAM Framework: A Case Study of Soft Skill Deficiencies in Private Higher Education

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Abstract
Service Learning (SL) is widely implemented across Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to foster personal growth, civic learning, and academic enhancement. While Public Universities utilize the structured **SULAM (Service-Learning Malaysia – University for Society)** framework mandated by the Ministry of Higher Education, many private institutions and teacher training institutes continue to implement unstructured community service focused primarily on volunteerism. This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of non-SULAM service-learning courses by using the national SULAM framework as a diagnostic tool to identify behavioural and operational gaps in student performance. This research uses a qualitative case study design with seven teams (N=70) to explore 'in-situ' process skills: specifically, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. Process data are triangulated using field observation notes, data ethnography of electronic communication via WhatsApp, email, and telecommunication data. Analysis for this research finds that failure typically occurs in three forms: (i) issues with management visibility and upward management issues irrespective of physical accomplishment, (ii) logical problems with operational processes and a lack of empathy in conditions of adaptability and dynamic constraint requirements, and (iii) a phenomenon of solidarity with experiences of disruption and/or sustaining teamwork based on degree of role awareness and visibility. The findings suggest that without the structured guidance of the SULAM framework specifically the *Analysing* and *Manifestation* phases students in private HEIs may treat community service as manual labour rather than a pedagogical experience. This validates the need to expand the SULAM framework beyond public universities to ensure all graduates achieve the intended soft skill outcomes. This paper contributes to the literature by moving beyond the implementation studies of public universities to provide a comparative diagnostic of the "non-SULAM" landscape. It highlights the specific behavioural risks of unstructured volunteerism, arguing for the necessity of process-based assessment rubrics.

Introduction

Service Learning (SL) has been discovered to be a significant learning method in institutions of higher learning that has managed to bridge the divide that exists between theoretical knowledge and engagement with society. Service Learning has been recognized to facilitate the achievement of the basic learning outcomes of graduates regarding personal growth and development and application of knowledge. The application of Service Learning depends entirely on its implementation because the community service may become mere physical labor without the learning component of SL. (Kawai, 2021; Radović et al., 2021). Within the Malaysian setting, the Ministry of Higher Education has formalized this method through the Service-Learning Malaysia – University for Society (SULAM) program. SULAM uses the ACEM approach of Analysis, Construction, Execution, and Manifestation in order to ensure the linking of the project and the academic outcomes (Hanum et al., 2021; Jamhari et al., 2024).

Despite this auspicious beginning at a national level, there is a certain imbalance when it comes to its effectiveness. The public institutions have been able to fully include the best practices of SULAM, whereas many Private Higher Education Institutions and Teacher Training Institutions deliver their community service in the form of volunteerism, rather than as structured programs in settings not following SULAM (Mohamad et al., 2024). In such settings, the focus is often on the output itself, such as cleaning the park, rather than the intellectual and behavioral processes involved in such achievement (Culcasia & Fontana Venegas, 2023; Smith et. al., 2022).

Current literature regarding Malaysian Service-Learning (SL) focuses mainly on success stories in public universities regarding its implementations, thus resulting in a prominent research gap regarding comparative diagnosis outside SULAM environments (Jamhari et al., 2024). Additionally, most studies rely for their assessments purely based on outcome measurements (final reports submitted), thus hiding process ineffectiveness such as poor vertical management structures, operational illogic, along with incidents of social loafing most forms of which are counter effective for teaching objectives of Service Learning (Gabelica et al., 2022; Saif Ghaleb, 2024).

This gap creates a hindrance for the successful implementation of the education agenda. When private HEIs follow unstructured methods, there are questions about the ability of their students to hone necessary soft skills, including communication, collaborative working, problem-solving, and adaptability, that are critically important for being industry ready. The existing body of knowledge chiefly sheds light on the success stories that unfold in structured environments, creating a substantial gap in the existing body of knowledge about the current status of Service Learning in private institutions.

Significance of the Study

Considering the growing need for standardization in the private sector, the value of the SULAM framework has been brought to the fore not only as a delivery mechanism but also as a diagnostic tool in this research. The relevance of this research work lies in the applicability thereof for the following three key stakeholders:

1. **For Private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):** This study serves as a critical diagnostic tool. By benchmarking unstructured courses against the SULAM framework, it identifies specific behavioural risks that occur when process evaluation is neglected. It argues that without the "Analysing" and "Manifestation" phases, service delivery is viewed by students merely as "work to be done" rather than a learning experience.

2. **For Educators and Curriculum Designers:** The importance of this study shift focuses on Outcome-Based Education (OBE), which checks whether the student completed the project, to Process-Based Assessment, which checks whether the student exhibits qualities of adaptability and empathy. It also argues the importance of creating process rubrics to uncover "invisible failures," like poor upward management or lack of empathy, that are hidden by the successful physical implementation that occurs in an event.

3. **For Policymakers:** The results provide empirical support for the mandatory expansion of the SULAM framework to all public universities. To provide sound evidence that the required soft skills are achieved proportionately for all Malaysian graduates, the need for a harmonized approach in the private sector is proved in this study.

Literature Review

Service Learning: Conceptual Foundations

Service Learning (SL) can be understood as a learning strategy where formal academic learning is integrated with community service with a focus on two major purposes: learning for students and service for society (Kawai, 2021; Radović et al., 2021). Unlike volunteer work, SL requires a focus on learning instead of volunteer service (Ash & Clayton, 2009, cited in Jamhari et al., 2024). Arguing for service learning, those who support this theory believe that this learning tool has a great transformation power because of its potential to combine learning improvement, personal growth, and civic education in one single learning process (Resch & Schrittesser, 2023). Reflection plays a major role in this regard because, without this critical component, service learning may end up being only manual labour instead of a learning process (Stith et al., 2021).

The Malaysian Context and SULAM Framework

In Malaysian universities, for example, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced a uniform model for implementing Service Learning in Malaysian Universities for Society (SULAM) to ensure consistency among public universities (Hanum et al., 2021). This model has operationalized service learning using the ACEM stages Analyzing, Constructing, Executing, and Manifestation to align with learning outcomes and facilitate learning reflection (Jamhari et al., 2024). Public universities have observed a positive impact of SULAM on student professionalism and community involvement (Wahab, 2024). In contrast, private HEIs and Teacher Training Institutions have employed unstructured community service emphasizing practical outputs with less focus on learning reflection (Mohamad et al., 2024). This creates apprehension about consistency in soft skill development.

Experiential Learning Theory and Reflection

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning serves as the theoretical basis for SL. This theory describes a cycle with four stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation (Radović et al., 2021). This cycle refers to SULAM as follows: Executing refers to Concrete Experience. Manifestation refers to Reflective Observation. The literature finds that level of reflection and not merely attendance has a role

in fostering identity formation and deep learning (Kawai, 2021; Stith et al., 2021). International literature supports using reflection aids such as DEAL rubrics in learning (Howes et al., 2021).

Soft Skills Development and Measurement Challenges
SL often gets cited to remediate soft-skills gaps observed among Malaysian graduates regarding communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (Ramlee & Hamzah, 2022; Culcasia & Fontana Venegas, 2023). Nevertheless, studies using systematic reviews illustrate a great degree of diversity with regard to methods of assessment and a poor use of validated methods (Coelho & Martins, 2022). The available literature points out that a process-oriented assessment with a longitudinal model of evaluation needs to be employed in order to properly grasp developmental levels regarding such soft skills.

Team Dynamics and Social Loafing
Social loafing in group-based service-learning (SL) projects often occurs. This phenomenon refers to decreased effort made individually when engaged in collaborative work (Gabelica et al., 2022). The most important antecedents in such a phenomenon include roles being construed as ambiguous, visibility being low in tasks, and low potential for evaluation (Saif Ghaleb, 2024). While such circumstances have been widely observed for other studies within team learning concepts, this remains a phenomenon understudied in Malaysian service-learning environments, especially with regard to reflection and soft skill performance.

Critical Synthesis and Research Gaps
The literature converges on three key findings. Firstly, reflection quality and authenticity of ACEM are critical in assuring the success of service learning (SL); nonetheless, such aspects are less likely to be systematically measured in Malaysian private HEIs (Kawai, 2021; Jamhari et al., 2024). Secondly, a degree of inconsistency continues to be observed regarding soft skills assessment, with only a few studies validating behavioral factors and soft skills scales (Culcasia & Fontana Venegas, 2023; Coelho & Martins, 2022). Thirdly, social loafing and team learning dynamics are considered undertheorized concepts in SL projects, despite their significance regarding teamwork and flexibility (Gabelica et al., 2022; Saif Ghaleb, 2024). This study bridges this gap with a focus on linking unstructured community service delivery with the SULAM model for diagnosing behavioral and operational failures while arguing for process assessment rubrics.

Table 1
Research Gaps Identified in Literature Review

Research Area	Identified Gap	Why It Matters	Proposed Study Response
Reflection Quality – define	Limited use of validated reflection-quality rubrics and sparse reporting of reflection criteria in Malaysian SL studies.	Reflection quality drives identity development and deep learning; absence reduces pedagogical impact.	Embed real-time interventions and apply DEAL-informed rubric to score reflection artefacts.
Soft Skills Measurement	Heterogeneous instruments and short-term designs limit	Employers demand communication, teamwork, adaptability;	Use validated soft skills scales, triangulate with behavioural indicators

	comparability of soft skills outcomes.	inconsistent measures hinder benchmarking.	and communication logs.
Social Loafing in SL Contexts	Few studies examine loafing within SL projects and its link to role clarity and evaluation potential.	Loafing undermines collaboration and reduces learning gains in team-based SL projects.	Code role clarity, task visibility, and team learning; analyse their association with loafing and reflection quality.
ACEM Fidelity and Outcome Linkage	Minimal reporting of phase-level fidelity and its relationship to learning outcomes.	Without fidelity checks, success claims lack validity and comparability.	Develop ACEM Fidelity Checklist and model its relationship to reflection quality and soft skills outcomes.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

- RQ1: How well does ACEM fidelity predict quality of reflection and soft skill achievement in unstructured community service projects?
  H1: A positive association between increased fidelity for ACEM, especially in the Constructing and Manifestation stage, and better-quality reflection as well as soft-skills advancement (communication, teamwork, adaptability) would be observed.
- RQ2: How does role clarity and task visibility affect social loafing among student teams participating in community service?
  H2: Role clarity and task visibility are expected to predict a decrease in social loafing behaviour and increased team cohesion.
- RQ3: What reflection quality mediate the relationship between service-task engagement and soft skill development?
  H3: Reflection quality would be a mediator for the association between service-task engagement (in terms of time spent and complexity level) and the acquisition of soft skills to intensify learning gains.
- RQ4: What are the behavioural and operational distinctions which distinguish community service that is non-SULAM from a systematic SULAM learning process towards achieving learning objectives?
  H4: A team operating in a non-SULAM environment would likely have far more behavioural problems (such as management gaps upwards and operational illogic) than a SULAM-aligned team.

Methodology

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative case study design with observation as a methodology for investigating behavioural phenomena as community service projects are being put into action. This design of this research has several purposes. Firstly, this design targets overcoming conventional assessment methods, such as final project reports, with a focus on process-oriented evidence more specifically, student use of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability. This addresses deficiencies in fidelity and behavioural observation identified in existing literature (Kawai, 2021; Radović et al., 2021).

Context and Participants

This study took place as a mandatory course for Community Service for a private Malaysian institution of higher learning. A total of 70 undergraduate students were involved in this study

and were divided evenly into seven project groups with ten participants in each group. The seven project groups were assigned to work with several community organizations such as an ecological park, a national zoo, a shelter for animals, a mosque, a river restoration project, and two others that were organized events on campus. This diversity contributed to variability in operational conditions for completing tasks.

Data Collection Methods

The data was collected for a semester and included triangulation methods for increasing validity:

1. Direct Participant Observation Field Notes: While implementing the project, site visits were conducted, and observations regarding behavioural factors such as time punctuality, use of resources, teamwork performance while under pressure, and problem-solving methods were noted. Emphasis was given to observations regarding social loafing, workflow bottlenecks, and flexibility while working in a high-pressure environment.

2. Digital Ethnography: (Communication Logs Upward management abilities were determined using professional means of communications such as WhatsApp group chats, email threads, and telephone calls. Timeliness in providing status updates, reactivity to questions posed by lecturers, and response to formal protocol invitations were among the quantitative measurements taken. Unsuccessful communication and/or access were considered critical behavioural weaknesses.

3. Real-time Interventions & Debrief On-site corrective directives (e.g., encouraging parallel tasks to reduce bottleneck effects) were used as a form of stress test to explore flexibility and operational thinking. The immediate reactions to such correctives provided information about reflection-in-action and dynamic problem-solving.

Data Analysis

The data generated through observation and communication records was employed for thematic analysis using an inductive coding paradigm. Open codes such as 'waiting for supplies,' 'unreachable PIC,' and 'passive observers' were initially grouped under larger categorical codes denoting specific work-related skills. Subsequent integration of these codes resulted in the formation of participants' behavioural types on work execution:

1) The Silent Executors (high physical output and low visibility of communications)
2) The Disengaged & Fragmented (low cohesion & passive involvement)
3) The Illogical Operators (operators with poor operational logic and empathy)
4) The Ideal State (high adaptability, strong cohesion)

This coding system was aligned with SULAM's ACEM phase to determine fidelity and areas where reflection quality and role definition may be incomplete. The research gaps are directly addressed because this analysis connects fidelity of implementation, quality of reflection, and soft skill outcomes even in a non-SULAM environment.
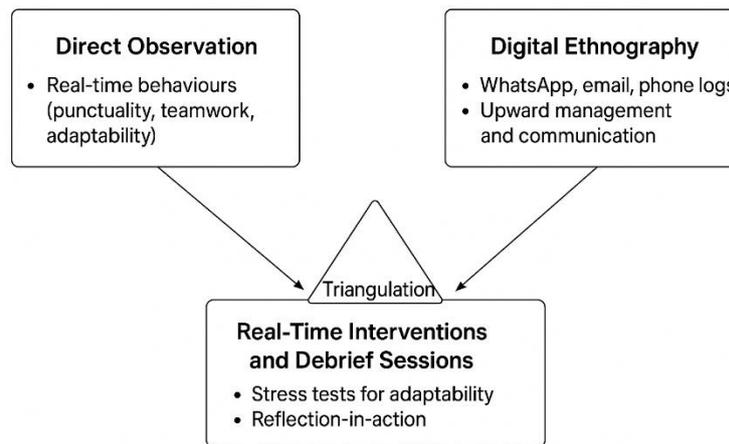
Figure 1: Data Triangulation Diagram

Table 2

Data Sources Mapped to Research Questions

Research Question	Data Source
RQ1: To what extent does ACEM phase fidelity predict reflection quality and soft skill outcomes?	Field Observation Notes (ACEM phase indicators), Real-Time Debriefs (adaptability), Reflection artefacts
RQ2: How do role clarity and task visibility influence social loafing in student teams?	Field Observation Notes (role/task allocation), Communication Logs (responsiveness, visibility)
RQ3: What reflection quality mediate the relationship between service-task engagement and soft skill development?	Reflection artefacts scored via DEAL rubric, Real-Time Debriefs, Communication Logs
RQ4: What behavioural and operational differences exist between non-SULAM and SULAM benchmarks?	Comparative coding of ACEM fidelity markers from Observation Notes and Communication Logs

Findings

A Thematic analysis of observation notes and communications revealed that there were three major behavioural threads that deviated from anticipated learning outcomes. This also highlights the disconnect between task achievement (physical delivery) and process mastery (proficiency as a practitioner). This data also aligned behavioural threads with SULAM's ACEM model to determine soft skill achievement.

To what extent does ACEM phase fidelity predict reflection quality and soft skill outcomes?
The most prevalent failure among high-output groups was the inability to maintain professional visibility. This was best exemplified by **Group 6 (Zoo)** and **Group 7 (Masjid)**, categorized in the matrix as *"The Silent Executors"* completed physically demanding tasks but failed to provide real-time updates or evidence of progress. Despite the high physical demand of zoo maintenance and mosque cleaning, both groups failed to provide real-time status updates. Group 7 specifically demonstrated a critical failure in crisis readiness; the designated Person in Charge (PIC) was unreachable during the event because their mobile phone was left in a vehicle. This behaviour suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of "Upward Management." Students viewed the lecturer as an *evaluator of the final product* rather than a *stakeholder in the process*. Consequently, they treated communication as an administrative

burden to be avoided rather than a strategic tool for accountability. The "phone in the car" incident highlights a lack of professional foresight regarding safety and emergency protocols. This gap confirms **RQ1** and supports **H1**, showing that **low fidelity in the Manifestation phase correlates with poor reflection quality and unobservable soft-skill performance**.

How do role clarity and task visibility influence social loafing in student teams?
Group 1 (Eco Park) fractured under moderate strain, with idle members disengaging after completing easier tasks evidence of social loafing under low task visibility and weak role clarity. In the Eco Park project, where resources (scrubbing tools) were limited and the physical strain was moderate, the team fractured. Members who finished the easier task (weeding) became passive observers of their struggling teammates. This is in line with the Ringelmann effect, where the bigger the size of the group, the lower the performance of the individual, and especially if the task is loosely defined, the average contribution made per individual will be less to the output of the group (Kravit and Martin, 1986). Conversely, Group 2 (River Rehabilitation) achieved the **Ideal State**, demonstrating complete cohesion and resilience while planting 115 trees under extreme heat. The shared intensity of the hardship eliminated hierarchy and passivity, forcing a "survival" mentality that unified the team. These findings answer **RQ2** and support **H2**, confirming that **role clarity and task visibility suppress loafing and foster team learning**, while ambiguity and uneven task distribution encourage fragmentation.

What reflection quality mediates the relationship between service-task engagement and soft skill development?
Groups classified as *"The Illogical Operators"* demonstrated high visibility but low operational competence. Groups 4 and 5, classified as **Illogical Operators**, demonstrated high visibility but poor operational logic and empathy. Group 4 created a bottleneck by waiting for ice before preparing beverages, revealing a lack of parallel processing. Students displayed linear thinking in a dynamic environment. By waiting for ice to arrive before preparing beverage mixtures, they created an artificial bottleneck. This reveals a deficit in "Parallel Processing" the ability to identify tasks that can be performed simultaneously to maximize efficiency. Group 5 over-emphasized prizes during children's games, triggering emotional distress and failing to deploy facilitators for crowd control. In the event management module involving children, students prioritized the *mechanics* of the game (winning/losing) over the *psychology* of the participant. The over-emphasis on "prizes" led to emotional distress among the children. This indicates a gap in Stakeholder Empathy; students failed to adapt their communication style to the emotional maturity of their audience. These failures reflect gaps in **Constructing** (role clarity and contingency planning) and **Executing** (adaptive logic and stakeholder sensitivity). Reflection-in-action prompts improved adaptability when applied, but absent structured reflection limited soft-skill gains. This partially supports **H3**, as reflection quality mediated outcomes only when actively facilitated.

What behavioural and operational differences exist between non-SULAM and SULAM benchmarks?
Diagnostic Mapping indicated the presence of systemic shortcomings in the domains of Analysing (stakeholder alignment and child psychology), Constructing (role assignment and protocol followsthrough), and Manifestation (reflection and reporting) for Analysing, Constructing, and Manifestation, respectively in the teams that are unaffiliated with SULAM,

and represented through Figure 2 below. The figure shows the causal chain where the negative archetypes 'Silent Executors,' 'Disengaged and Fragmented,' and 'Illogical Operators' manifest in creating the systemic gaps in the respective domains of the ACEM model. The findings thus validate RQ4 and confirm H4 and thereby establish the fact that unstructured experiences in the form of volunteerism fail to offer the learning shields and process assessment mechanisms to mold the students from the negative archetypes to the 'Ideal State'.
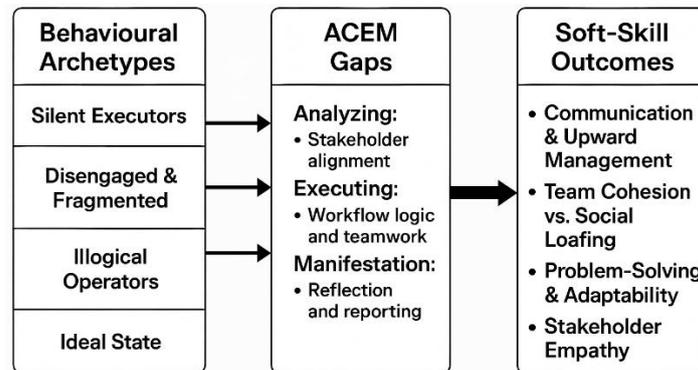

Figure 2: The Diagnostic Model Linking Behavioural Archetypes to ACEM Gaps and Soft-Skill Outcomes.

Table 3
Group-Level Summary of Behavioural Archetypes and Process Implications

Group	Via Observation	Outcome of Observation	Category on participants' behaviour
G1 (Eco Park)	5 members scrubbing under strain; 2 helped; 2 sat idle	Lack of shared responsibility; empathy gap under hardship	Fragmented Team
G2 (Sg. Klang)	All members worked equally; planted 115 trees in heat	High solidarity and resilience; model for team cohesion	Gold Standard
G3 (Shelter Booth)	Late arrivals: no questions asked; minimal engagement	Initiative and curiosity missing; advocacy failure	Passive Team
G4 (Event Ops)	Waiting for ice before prepping drinks; idle during rush	Poor workflow logic; failure in parallel processing	Illogical Team
G5 (Event Games)	Over-emphasis on prizes; crowd control failure	Stakeholder empathy gap; missing reflective wrap-up	Unprepared Team
G6 (Zoo Negara)	No real-time updates; no photos; assumed hard work	Visibility failure: accountability compromised	Silent Team
G7 (Masjid An Nur)	No invitation; PIC unreachable; ignored reporting request	Professional protocol breach; critical safety risk	Unreachable Team

Discussion

The Necessity of Process-Based Assessment in OBE
The primary implication of these findings is the danger of the "Assessment Black Box." The findings confirm the risk of relying solely on **outcome-based evaluation** in service-learning

courses. Groups such as Zoo Negara (G6) and Masjid An Nur (G7) demonstrated high physical output but failed critical professional competencies communication visibility and stakeholder management because process evidence was absent. Without structured reflection and reporting, community service devolves into manual labour rather than a pedagogical experience, validating **RQ1** and **H1**. If these groups were graded solely on their Final Reports, **Group 6 (Zoo)** and **Group 7 (Masjid)** would likely receive high distinctions for their physical labour.

However, the observational data reveals that they failed critical professional competencies (communication and accessibility). This validates the argument that Outcome-Based Education (OBE) in soft skills modules must be supported by Process-Based Assessment. These findings resonate with parallel research in labor education, which emphasize that effective evaluation must move beyond final reports to assess real-time behaviors such as cooperation, safety awareness, and accountability during the practical execution (Hao et al., 2024).

Futhermore, this approach supports prior literature emphasizing that reflection quality and process documentation are essential for learning outcomes (Kawai, 2021; Stith et al., 2021) and aligns with recent findings that data-driven monitoring is critical for tracking the actual progress of social interventions rather than just their completion (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025).

Role Clarity, Task Visibility, and Social Loafing
In particular, the Solidarity Paradox in relation to G1 (Eco Park) and G2 (River Rehabilitation) projects illustrates how role clarity, alongside task visibility, impacts team dynamics. Where roles are ambiguous, with an uneven distribution of hardship, there is some indication of social loafing, but this was reversed when hardship was more evenly distributed, along with a clear understanding of roles. This finding supports RQ2, as well as hypothesis H2, in line with the team learning literature, highlighting visibility as a dissuader of social loafing (Gabelica et al., 2022).

Linking ACEM Fidelity to Soft-Skill Outcomes
From the operational failures noted in Group 4 (Event Operations), students are struggling to apply their theoretical understanding of Project Management tools to an operational context of, say, changing the Critical Path. In class, "Ice" is simply a variable on a list, but in an operational context, this represents a dependency that shuts down the whole production line. This outcome supports the need for an interventionist approach to teaching, in which the teacher actively steps in (as was done in this study) to force students to reassess their reasoning. When benchmarked with respect to the SULAM outcome, the systematic weaknesses of non-SULAM groups were noted in the stages of Analysing, Constructing, Manifestation. High fidelity groups such as G2, River Rehabilitation were found to have high cohesiveness, adaptiveness, but in groups that had low fidelity such as G4, G5, there were issues with the flow of logic and a lack of concern for stakeholders. This is in line with the Experiential Learning approach in learning, as proposed by Radović et al. (2021), in which structured stages of the process provide an impetus towards skill development. The above outcome supports RQ4 & H4 in ensuring the need for using ACEM Rubrics in a private HEI.

Reflection Quality as a Mediator
Additionally, the service-learning conduction involved the observation of the groups, where the observer would interact with the group members. The reflection-in-action observation and intervention within the events, occurring for example within G4 regarding the correcting of drink preparation, contributed towards enhancing adaptability and resource use, thus partially supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3). The lack of final stage reflections among the group members prevented the verification of the idea that the group members' endeavours led the group towards learning (Hawes et al., 2021; Culcasia & Fontana Venegas, 2023).

Practical and Policy Implications
The study underscores the necessity of **process-based assessment** in SL courses, particularly in private HEIs where volunteerism often lacks pedagogical structure. Recommended interventions include:
- **ACEM Fidelity Checklist** for phase-level compliance.
- **Reflection-quality rubrics** (e.g., DEAL model) integrated into grading.
- Explicit evaluation of **upward management**, **role clarity**, and **task visibility** as soft-skill indicators.

Extending SULAM beyond public universities will ensure equitable graduate outcomes and align community service with national education goals.

Conclusion and Recommendations
This research proves that unstructured community service projects in Malaysian private HEIs fail to realize the learning objectives of service learning. By using a benchmarking process based on a SULAM model usage assessment, this research identifies ineffectiveness in ASECM-related processes. On this basis, this research has shown that only assessing based on learning outcomes would be insufficient for successful learning. The SULAM model usage in a particular institution needs to be extended. This model would be more effective with additional ACECM rubrics for better assessment quality. Efficiency and quality checks based on a quality measure level using this model would be more effective for measuring successful learning. This model would be more effective in Malaysian private HEIs with additional fidelity checks.

Theoretically, this study advances the discourse on service learning by extending the application of the SULAM framework beyond public universities and demonstrating its diagnostic utility in identifying behavioural and operational gaps in unstructured community service projects. It reinforces experiential learning theory by empirically linking ACEM phase fidelity and reflection quality to soft-skill acquisition, addressing a major gap in Malaysian private HEI research. Practically, the study contributes a process-based assessment approach that integrates real-time interventions, communication ethnography, and fidelity checklists, offering educators and policymakers actionable tools to standardize service-learning practices and enhance graduate employability.

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