

Involvement of External Stakeholders in Designing Pedagogy for Experiential Learning at University Level: A Case Study

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Abstract

The participation of external stakeholders in pedagogical activities in higher education has increased in recent years, and this is because such involvement can potentially improve student learning outcomes. However, the strategies and processes have yet to be adequately explored and documented, especially in the context of the Malaysian university. This paper presents a case regarding how the external stakeholders were involved in the design and implementation of an experiential learning project for an elective module in Diploma programmes of Raffles University, Malaysia based on a pedagogical model. This model consists of three major phases: (1.) initiation and design; (2.) execution; and (3.) evaluation and review. The roles of external stakeholders and the responsibilities of lecturers in each phase were discussed. In addition, students' learning experiences and their reflections on the experiences were also described along with the discussion. This paper concludes that the developed pedagogical model may serve as an effective means to engage with external stakeholders in planning and delivering meaningful lessons for authentic learning at university level.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Experiential learning; External stakeholders' involvement; Higher education; Soft skills

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of higher education (HE) has undergone a tremendous change in recent decades. HE was shifted from a focus on enlightenment and liberal education for the elite to mass and universal education (Trow & Burrage, 2010). This shift has resulted in more university graduates in the employment market today, and they need to compete more intensively to win the hearts and minds of employers (Nghia, 2018). Many reports (e.g., Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011), however, have indicated that graduating from university is no longer enough to guarantee a job. The situation has become more complex as employers consistently have decried that the higher education institutions (HEIs) fail to produce qualified university graduates with relevant skills to perform effectively at the workplace. This means that there is a discrepancy between the skills that are sought by employers and the skills that are possessed by graduates (Nghia, 2018). In such a context, the universities are pressured to give more attention to the quality of their programmes and to ensure the work readiness of their graduates. At the same time, HEIs are facing challenges in their operation due to the severe reduction of funds allocated by the government (Lebeau et al., 2012). Some universities try to increase the fee, but with more investment in HE studies, graduates and parents expect greater advantages for career prospects in return (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013).

To address the changes mentioned earlier in HE and to make university education valuable, HEIs have initiated several strategies to enhance the employability skills of their graduates to ensure them to be successful in their careers. Chowdhury and Miah (2016) highlighted that universities today collaborate

more frequently with employers and other groups of external stakeholders to identify relevant skills needed for graduates and accordingly, revise the curricula and pedagogies.

Soft skills, or also known as non-academic skills or generic skills, are vital for university graduates for employability (David & Saeipour, 2018; Gruzdev, Kuznetsova, Tarkhanova, & Kazakova, 2018; Okolie, Nwosu, & Mlanga, 2019; Tang, 2019), and it is not an exception in Malaysia (Md-Ali, Shaffie, & Yusof, 2016; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020). Soft skills are those individual characteristics that affect a person's employability (Fahimirad, Nair, Kotamjani, Mahdinezhad, & Feng, 2019). Various studies have been conducted in the past two decades (e.g., Azmi, Hashim, & Yusoff, 2018; Fahimirad et al., 2019; Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), 2006; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020; Shakir, 2009; Singh, Thambusamy, & Ramly, 2014) in the context of Malaysia to identify the essential soft skills for local university graduates. In general, soft skills that are valued by employers include communication skills, creativity, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, teamwork, interpersonal skills, adaptability and flexibility, lifelong learning and information management, integrity and professional ethic, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills.

Despite all the aspirations and mechanisms that have been introduced by the MoHE, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), and the HEIs to assure that the graduates are fit for employment while entering to the workplace, the fact remains - many employers have complained on the quality of fresh graduates, specifically in the area of soft skills (Hanafi & Nordin, 2014; Lim, Lee, Yap, & Ling, 2016). The complaints from the employers are giving added pressure to academic institutions (Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020). Both Tang (2019) and Md-Ali et al. (2016) stated that the lecturers play a pivotal role in designing and delivering suitable course or lesson to inculcate the soft skills in university students successfully. In other words, more meaningful and effective pedagogy is required (David & Saeipour, 2018). This paper presents a strategy and the process to teach the soft skills among university students with the involvement of external stakeholders and the application of experiential learning theory.

BACKGROUND

Involvement of External Stakeholders in HE

A stakeholder can be defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Stakeholders in HE can be described as either internal or external. ‘Internal stakeholders’ are members of the academic community who participate in the day-to-day operation of the HEIs, including faculty and non-academic staff, managers, students, and the institution itself (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002). On the other hand, ‘external stakeholders’ refer to groups or individuals that have an interest in HE but are not involved in the daily operation of the HEIs. They may include future employers of the graduates, parents, industry organizations, non-government organizations (NGOs), local agencies, business partners, professional bodies, public organizations, and other HE institutions and providers (Marshall, 2018). Both internal and external stakeholders need to work collaboratively to improve HE curriculum (Lindsten, Auvinen, & Juuti, 2019).

Nghia (2018) conducted a qualitative study in Vietnam to investigate the roles of external stakeholders and the factors that influence their commitment in these roles in inculcating soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, and problem-solving) in students. The results suggested that the roles of external stakeholders may include the consultation of relevant soft skills for curriculum improvement, development of pedagogies to successfully teach these skills to students, supervision of student internship programmes, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the skills development programmes. In addition, the results also showed that external stakeholders' commitment in playing these roles were influenced by their interests in these roles, university location, university status, and university leadership.

The involvement of external stakeholders in HE takes various forms and approaches and is not always formalized (Thune, 2011). For example, many universities invite external stakeholders to conduct guest lectures to teach relevant work skills to students (Carter, Ruskin, & Cassilles, 2017). Moreover, work-based learning (WBL) approach is implemented to allow students to work in the industry to help them to enhance their abilities and develop essential competencies with the guidance of the employers (Chiang & Chuen, 2018; Jackson, 2015; Nunley, Pugh, Romero, & Seals, 2016). Similarly, service-learning and extra-curricular activities are conducted by various external stakeholders such as local authorities and agencies, employers, NGOs, and public service sectors to offer learning opportunities to students in developing the soft skills (Osman, 2011; Tran, 2015). This body of literature, in short, suggests that the involvement of external stakeholders in HE is desirable due to its positive effects on students' learning (Nghia, 2018; Steghöfer et al., 2018) and academic programmes (Fagrell, Fahlgren, & Gunnarsson, 2020; Marshall, 2018).

Experiential Learning Theory and Cycle

A variety of theoretical methods has been developed to understand how an individual learns. Experiential learning theory (ELT), which was developed by Kolb (1984), has been considered as one of the most broadly applied learning theories in HE (Chiu, 2019; Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Sharlanova, 2004). ELT is based on the premise that a person learns from direct experience or 'learning through reflection on doing' (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's theory is particularly fascinating because as opposed to those conventional or traditional teacher-centred approaches, it is student-centred and highly focuses on personal development. In other words, the learners are the active participants in the experiential learning process.

According to Kolb (1984), learning is a four-stage process. Learners continuously gain and construct knowledge through assimilating new lessons and feelings stem from experience in each stage. Effective learning will only take place when a learner experiences a cycle of the four stages: (1.) concrete experience; (2.) reflective observation; (3.) abstract conceptualization; and (4.) active experimentation. In general, 'concrete experience' is the time when learners encounter or engage a new experience that creates a learning opportunity. 'Reflective observation' means the learners review the experience to discover if there are any discrepancies between experience and understanding. 'Abstract conceptualization' focuses on the learners' ability to explain and justify what they have experienced through prior knowledge. 'Active experimentation' refers to the demonstration of learners in applying the new knowledge they have obtained from experience in different situations to discover ways for improvement (Kolb, 1984). Aside from learning styles, learning is also determined by a learner's ability to assimilate and communicate the experience (Kosir, Fuller, Tyburski, Berant, & Yu, 2008; Li & Armstrong, 2015).

The participation of external stakeholders in pedagogical activities in HE has increased in recent years, and this is because such involvement can potentially improve student learning outcomes. However, the strategies and processes have yet to be adequately explored and documented, especially in the Eastern university context (Nghia, 2018). This paper reports a case regarding how the external stakeholders were involved in designing meaningful experiential learning activities in an academic module at university level in Malaysia in order to effectively develop the relevant soft skills among students and achieve the course learning outcomes (CLOs).

Module Specification

The case described in this paper took place within an elective module titled 'Teamwork and Leadership' for Diploma programmes at Raffles University (the University), Malaysia. There were 30 students from Diploma in Visual Communication, Diploma in Interior Design, and Diploma in Business Studies in this module. The module aims to provide students with information about the concept and importance of teamwork and leadership in the modern workplace. The topics covered by this module are: the definition of team and leadership; the importance of teams; team interaction and communication; exploration of individual potential for leadership; examples of leadership in different settings and

contexts; and, strategies that help teams to operate effectively to achieve the goals. Students are required to demonstrate their understanding of relevant concepts by applying them in practical projects and activities. The CLOs of the module are:

1. Define team and explain why teams are important.
2. Describe how to interact in a team.
3. Define leadership and discuss leadership by giving examples in different contexts.
4. Describe how a team operate effectively.
5. Apply strategies that help teams to achieve their goals.

In previous semesters, this module was rooted in ‘lecture-based approach’ to prepare students for the final examination. This is a traditional classroom teaching approach where the lecturers deliver lesson verbally in combination with a projector, visual display surface, and writing surface such as a chalkboard or whiteboard. Students are taught in a way that is conducive to sitting and listening (Tularam & Machisella, 2018). However, to successfully develop soft skills among students, active learning pedagogy and participatory methods such as role-playing, discussion, and situation analysis are necessary to allow them to feel the commitment for personal development. Designing experiential activities related to the course that allows students to interact with others and apply the relevant skills in practical situations is also a good strategy to be used (Guerra-Báez, 2019).

In order to create more meaningful and authentic learning experiences to cultivate relevant soft skills among the students and to achieve the CLOs effectively, a pedagogical model was developed to guide the design, execution, and evaluation of an experiential learning project in the module. External stakeholders with professional skills and experience in team building and leadership training were identified to be involved in the development of this model and the project.

METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY

The involvement of external stakeholders in the pedagogical processes can create many conflicts and consequently lead to dissatisfaction of all involved parties (Steghöfer et al., 2018). Therefore, guidelines that can be used to guide the action of lecturers (internal stakeholders) and external stakeholders in the entire process of collaboration are included in the developed pedagogical model. As shown in Figure 1, the model consists of three significant phases: (1.) initiation and design; (2.) execution; (3.) evaluation and review. The flow of the overall collaboration process, the roles and responsibilities of the university lecturer and external stakeholders in each phase, the degree of involvement of both parties in each role are provided. Each single step is meant to be iterated until the mutual agreement is reached and the optimal decision is made. It is also noticeable from the model that when the experiential learning of students occurs and what both parties can do to maximize the learning of the students to achieve the CLOs. This model offers a detailed ‘action plan’ for the involved parties to take note while collaborating with each other and when interacting with students. The following sections described a case regarding how this pedagogical model was applied systematically in an outdoor experiential activity.

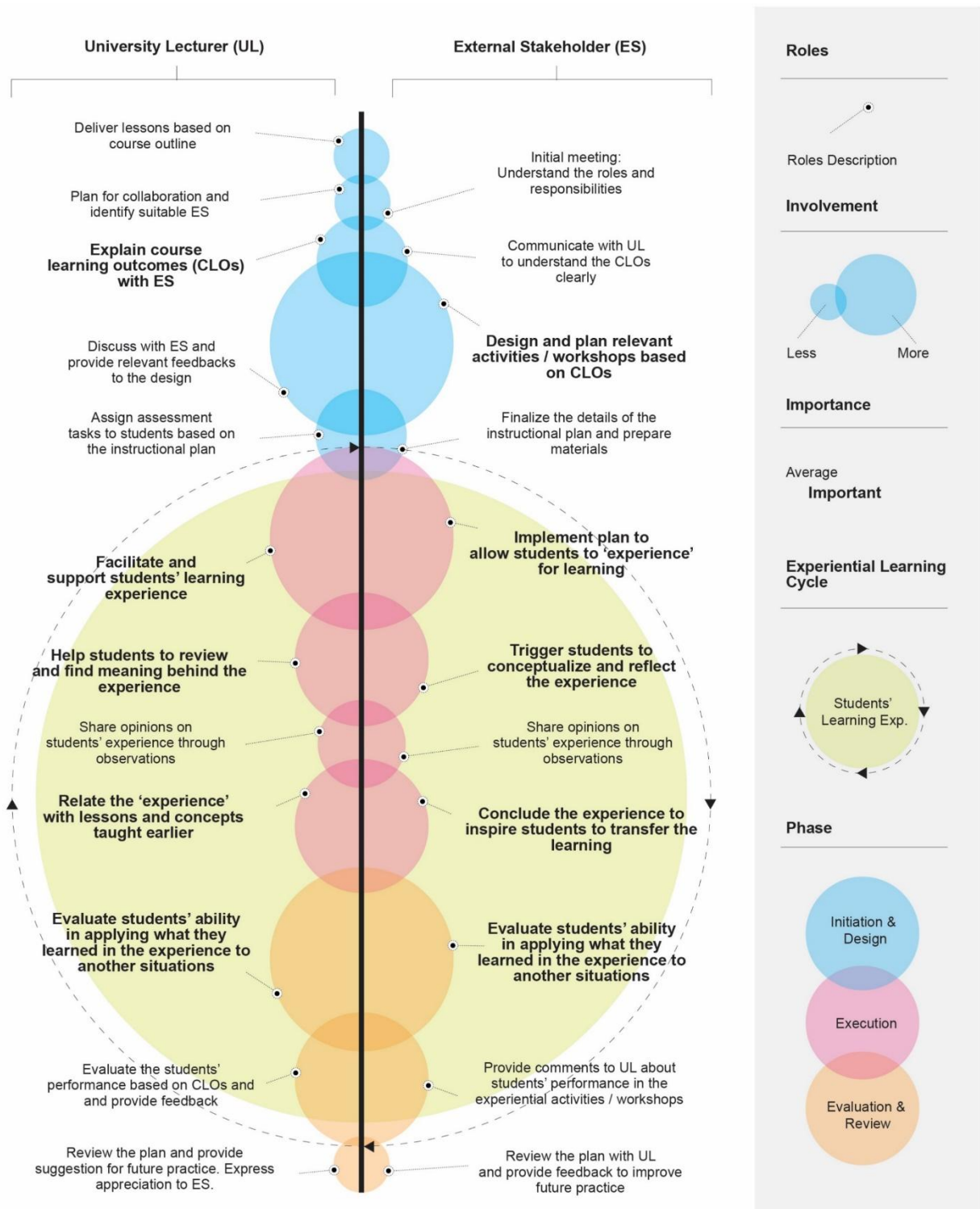


Figure 1: The developed pedagogical model.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Phase 1: Initiation and Design

Based on the model, the lecturer who is in charge of the module delivered relevant concepts about teamwork and leadership to the students according to the course outline. Students were equipped with prior knowledge before the experiential learning took place. Meanwhile, the lecturer also initiated a plan to collaborate with the external stakeholders by defining goals, identifying potential external stakeholders, and risks as well as mitigation strategies. One of the key reasons for the lecturer to have such initiation was because it aligned with the University's mission to promote the practice of 'doing while learning and learning while doing'. The finalized external stakeholder for collaboration was Run Solution Biz Sdn. Bhd. (runsolution.com.my), a professional team building company based in Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia. This company is a registered training provider under Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF). In the initial meeting conducted by the lecturer, the external stakeholders expressed their interest to be involved in the design of the pedagogy and believed that they might be able to contribute to the learning of students (Nghia, 2018). The lecturer explained the goals, modes, and duration of the collaboration as well as the roles and responsibilities to external stakeholders. The lecturer received the verbal consent from the external stakeholders before proceeding with the detailed discussion of the CLOs. The lesson plan and lecture slides of related topics of the module were given to the external stakeholders after the initial meeting in order for them to gain a deeper understanding of the content or concepts that needed to be covered in the instructional plan.

Based on the CLOs and course materials, the external stakeholders had designed and developed an instructional plan for an experiential learning workshop consisting of two outdoor activities. This plan was finalized after a couple of rounds of iteration between the lecturer and external stakeholders.

The workshop was titled 'Go Beyond: Dynamic Teamwork and Leadership for University Students'. Such title was given because the workshop went 'beyond' the conventional teaching and learning setting, activities, and processes that the students typically experienced to enable them to learn through doing and reflection.

The students were pre-informed by the lecturer to meet at a recreational park nearby the University at the agreed schedule. The external stakeholders and the invited trainers were taken over the role of the lecturer to facilitate the students in the teambuilding workshop. Both photos and videos were taken to record the learning process.

Phase 2: Execution

30 students attended the team building workshop as scheduled. While the external stakeholders served as the trainers, the lecturer was the facilitator of the workshop on that day. Table 1 displays the plan and detailed schedule of the outdoor activities.

Table 1: Plan and Schedule of the Outdoor Teambuilding Workshop for the Students

Time	Activity	Description
First Session		
8:45 am – 9:00 am	Gather at recreational park	Lecturer introduced external stakeholders to students.
9:00 am – 10:30 am	Briefing, icebreaking, warm up activities, grouping, and initial tasks for the group	Students listened to the instructions of the external stakeholders and started interacting with each other.
10:30 am – 12:30 pm	Team building activity 1: 'F1 Challenge'	The teams were given a set of raw materials with which they have to create a working model of a man-

		powered car. The process began from perfecting the design right down to the implementation phase.
12:30 pm – 1:00 pm	Presentation	Students were required to conduct an interesting presentation for the ‘outcome’ (man-powered car) before the final racing competition. All the cars needed to be lined up for a head-to-head race down the track where the teams proved their grit.
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm	Lunch time	Lunch boxes were provided for the students to build a deeper relationship with their teammates.
<hr/> Second Session <hr/>		
2:00 pm – 2:30 pm	Debrief: ‘F1 Challenge’	External stakeholders and lecturers shared their observations based on students’ experience in the first teambuilding activity. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and initial reflection too.
2:30 pm – 4:00 pm	Team building activity 2: ‘Be Willing to Make Mistakes’	The teams were challenged to find the correct trail on a grid from one side to the other side while no one was allowed to talk or help each other out in any way. This activity encouraged them to not be afraid of making mistakes but to learn from the mistakes.
4:00 pm – 4:30 pm	Debrief: ‘Be Willing to Make Mistakes’	External stakeholders and lecturers shared their observations based on students’ experience in the second team building activity. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and give relevant examples they had previously encountered.
4:30 pm – 5:00 pm	Final wrap up, group photo, and dismiss	External stakeholders made concluding statements regarding the performance of the students. Lecturer tried to relate the ‘experience’ with the ‘concepts’ taught earlier in the classroom.
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Figure 2 depicts the learning experiences of students in the outdoor team building activities conducted and facilitated by external trainers.



Figure 2: Students' learning experience.

Phase 3: Evaluation and Review

A project brief was assigned to the students before the workshop. The brief introduced the workshop and described the assessment tasks for the students to complete after participating in the activities. It also contained the submission requirements and assessment criteria of the project. Instead of asking the students to produce an academic report, they were required to conduct a group presentation to describe and reflect in detail about the outdoor learning experiences through giving relevant examples. They

were also requested to demonstrate how they applied what they had learnt in different situations in the presentation (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Group presentation and reflection.

In their reflection, most of the students managed to provide relevant examples through their observations during the workshop while reflecting on their learning experiences. Most of them also managed to transfer the learning in other situations. Besides, their feedback to the workshop was positive. Most of them mentioned that such experiential learning activities that involved the external stakeholders had allowed them to understand more meaningfully of the ‘concepts’ they learned in the classroom.

This outdoor workshop had enhanced my understanding of teamwork. Classroom has ‘space limitation’ and therefore we would not be able to experience activity like ‘F1 Challenge’ if we did not go out. We could also interact more with each other when the space is bigger. Also, I realized that it is very important to express my idea when working in a team.

I believe I become braver to speak in front of people after the activities. I encountered a lot of ‘real problems’ while working in a team on that day. It was hard to experience the same things if we just had our learning in the classroom. From the activities, I also learnt how to communicate with different people to finish the tasks more effectively. In my case, our team members discussed and exchanged ideas when designing the logo for our F1 car.

This workshop had reassured my understanding that speaking out our own opinions is important when working in a team. It is because when expressing our opinions, we are providing other perspectives to look at the issues that perhaps other members overlook. Besides, our team members also can learn from what we share.

This workshop had allowed me to learn more effectively regarding how to communicate with members in a team. Communication or discussion when working in a team is very important. We need to think before we talk.

This workshop had enhanced my understanding of the definition and meaning of ‘team’. A team is a group of people who use the resources and work on tasks to achieve a goal within a specific timeframe. Working in a team is a shared responsibility .

As evident in students’ reflection, they managed to understand and practice some soft skills during outdoor activities while interacting with their mates. The ‘soft skills’ that were mentioned the most in their reflections were: ‘communication’, ‘teamwork’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘confidence’, and ‘learn from mistakes’. More specifically, they became more aware of the importance to discuss, empower, encourage, share the responsibilities, and collaborate with their teammates while encountering problems or challenges in real life.

Finally, a review meeting was conducted between lecturer in charge of the module and the external stakeholders to evaluate the collaboration. Based on the observations of how the students performed and what had happened throughout the collaboration from different lenses, both parties identified strategies for improvement in the future. Specifically, the review meeting focused on the discussion of the behaviours and satisfaction of the students, the behaviours and satisfaction of the external stakeholders, and the lecturer's ability in coordinating the whole collaboration plan (Steghöfer et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing description, the developed pedagogical model is believed to be able to serve as an effective means to engage with external stakeholders while designing pedagogy for experiential learning at university level in the context of Malaysia. This model shows how to plan, act, observe and react (Steghöfer et al., 2018) on the involvement of external stakeholders in an academic module in HE. The three distinct phases and the roles and responsibilities of external stakeholders and lecturers were described in detailed in the model. A meaningful example was given to demonstrate how the model was applied in inculcating soft skills in students and achieving the CLOs. As evident in students' presentation and reflection, they managed to construct their understanding of the concepts of some soft skills taught inside the classroom through the outdoor experiential learning.

External stakeholders played an important role in shaping students' learning before, during, and after the activities. Not only had they helped tailor appropriate activities by referring to the course materials, but they also offered professional guidance in facilitating the students during the workshop and provided interesting but practical perspectives to the students in looking into the 'concepts' they had learnt in the classroom after the outdoor activities. On the other hand, the role of the lecturer was transformed to become the 'coordinator' in between the external stakeholders and students. Throughout the activities planning and executing process, the key responsibility of the lecturer was to ensure the suitability of the activities proposed by the external stakeholders in fulfilling the course requirements and the meaningfulness of the learning experiences for the students. Other than that, the lecturer also needs to aware of the goals and expectations of the external stakeholders and acknowledge their contributions after the collaborative activities for students.

Although meaningful outcomes were achieved through the development and implementation of the pedagogical model, more action research needs to be conducted to collect constructive feedback and different viewpoints from relevant stakeholders to continue to improve its feasibility and effectiveness. This model can be further applied and tested in various types of academic programmes and modules at university level as well as with different groups of external stakeholders.

In conclusion, the leaders of the universities in Malaysia are encouraged to devise comprehensive strategies and policies to create a supportive environment for external stakeholders to collaborate sustainably and effectively in educational activities (Nghia, 2018). This collaboration is vital because it can potentially improve students' learning experience and outcomes and consequently, increase their employability when they begin their professional careers.

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