

AN ASSESSMENT OF CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS' LEARNING

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Abstract

This study assesses the effects of co-curricular activities on students' learning at a higher education institution. The paper describes how co-curricular activities support the learning amongst the first year students in higher education. Specifically, it examined the aspects of learning when students are engaged in co-curricular activities. A total of 52 students were interviewed. The respondents were students from three different colleges at an institution. The respondents were interviewed at the end of their first year. The findings revealed that co-curricular activities promote curricular learning; strengthen social adaptation; helps to foster community engagement; and stimulate readiness for leadership. The results of the study imply that informal learning during co-curricular activities at the first year support the upcoming learning of students in the higher institutions. The impact of the learning at co-curricular activities serves as the catalyst towards the education for students' holistic development. Therefore, the learning during co-curricular activities should be integrated in curriculum planning and co curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation.

Keywords: Co-curricular; higher education; learning, socio-cultural, leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The national philosophy of education in Malaysia states that "Education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God". To achieve this aspiration, co-curricular programs have been designed to be integrated in the curriculum at Higher Education, so that all students at higher education institutions have the opportunity to be knowledgeable and competent, possess high moral standards, and are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as to contribute to the betterment of the family, society and nation at large (Siti Hajar Ismail, 2007).

Co-curricular activities are integrated into the curriculum at Higher Education to enhance the holistic development amongst students (Education in Malaysia, 2006). It is believed that students' excellence is not only measured in academic fields, but also in the acquisition of soft-

skill or generic-skill competencies. These combined factors nevertheless, may contribute to students' intellectual capabilities and personality attributes. In the contemporary job market today, value-added attributes are prime factors for students or graduates to face challenges and needs in their working environment. Some of the skills needed are, leadership skills, team-working skills, communication and social skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, and development of moral and professional ethic skills. In co-curricular programs, these skills are embedded and integrated in the teaching and learning process of co-curriculum activities.

Higher institutions are responsible for monitoring and overseeing the implementation of co-curriculum programs and the teaching and learning process. Activities or courses offered under a co-curricular program should be of relevance to the needs and aspiration for student personality development and excellence, and its practice through structured pedagogy, the integrative learning system that is, acquisition of professional/technical skill as well as the soft-skill. The integrated learning system aims to produce holistic graduates (Edward & Nofri, 2005). This would ensure higher education institutions produce well-balanced graduates to face current career challenges.

In this study, students of three colleges in an institution were identified and their first year involvement in co-curricular activities was assessed. It was important to examine their learning experience in order to provide information to the Higher Education Minister regarding the curriculum development. Furthermore, it gave feedback to the management in terms of how far these co-curricular activities support them in their up-coming learning at the institution. It was projected that other five colleges will be involved in the next phase. The study aims to assess the students' learning experiences of the co-curricular activities at the institution. The assessment focuses on the areas of the social adaptation, leadership and community engagement. The assessment of the co-curricular program at Higher Education level yields insights into how significant the activities support the students' personal development. Importantly, it provides guidelines for stakeholders in designing, implementing and evaluating co-curricular programs at higher education institutions.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

The higher education sector is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The establishment of this ministry on March 27, 2004 was a result of the re-structuring of the Ministry of Education and it marked an important part of history in Malaysia, particularly in the development and expansion of the higher education sector.

MOHE is the governing authority for the Malaysian higher education sector. It oversees HEIs (both public universities and private higher educational institutions), community colleges, polytechnics and other government agencies involved in higher education activities such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and the National Higher Education Fund Corporation and others. Malaysia's HEIs (i.e. public universities, private higher educational institutions, polytechnics and community colleges) houses more than a million students in 2011, of which about 93,000 are international students from more than 100 countries.

With a multi-ethnic population of about 28.3 million, Malaysia had 20 public universities, 53 private universities and six foreign university branch campuses; 403 active private colleges, 30 polytechnics and 73 public community colleges in 2011 (Education in Malaysia, 2006). These HEIs

offer a wide range of tertiary qualifications at affordable prices. At this level, students are offered opportunity to be involved with co-curricular activities besides the formal academic curriculum.

Curriculum

Generally, at tertiary education level, institutions of higher education offer courses leading to the awards of certificate, diploma, first degree and higher degree qualifications (at academic and professional fields). The duration of study for a basic bachelor degree programme is three years and the courses of study at this level are provided by both the public and private education sectors, attracting many international students.

Co-Curriculum

Co-curricular activities are compulsory at tertiary level in Malaysia, where all students must participate in at least two activities, of which one must be sports-related. Co-curricular activities are often categorized under the following: Uniformed Groups, Performing Arts, Clubs & Societies, and Sports & Games. The main objectives of the program are to develop more holistic individuals who are able to function more intelligently and effectively in the world.

The aims of Co-curricular

The Co-curricular program is integrated in all academic programs. Fundamentally, the aim of the co-curricular program is to provide an opportunity and provide education in relation to soft skill development. In sum, the objectives are:

- i) to educate students to be responsible and fulfilled human
- ii) to develop character, critical thinking, social skills and talents.
- iii) to provide students with a network of peers and adults who have similar interests.

In line with the objectives of the co-curricular program, there is a need to examine the co-curricular program to provide feedback in order to further recommend the activities to be improved and carried out at all higher institutions. Therefore, it was timely and apt for this assessment to take place by looking into the effects of the first year students' involvement in Co-curricular activities at the selected colleges.

THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in the context of a post-graduate research undertaken by a Master candidate at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) in Malaysia. The study examines how co-curricular activities support students' learning. Specifically, the study aims at assessing the involvement of the first year students' in co-curricular activities. The paper presented the results based on the main objectives of the study, which are:

1. How did co-curricular activities help to strengthen social adaptation?
2. How did co-curricular activities foster community engagement?
3. How did co-curricular activities stimulate leadership?
4. What were the challenges faced by students participating in co-curricular activities?

The study employed a qualitative method. A total of 52 students from three selected colleges participated in the interview. There were 38 female and 14 male students. Interviews were conducted after their first year degree program at the higher education. All the participants were asked the same set of semi-structured questions. Each interview lasted about one hour to one and a half hours. This paper highlights the involvement of 52 participants who showed significant learning experience in co-curricular activities during their first year. These participants were articulate of their involvement and their learning experience. They are comprised of leaders of a club, committee members of a society they are involved.

Before the actual data collection amongst the 52 participants, the initial information was gathered through the conversational-style interviews with the two lecturers identified for the study. The two lecturers are from the advisory board of the co-curricular program at an institution. The two lectures were identified as individuals directly responsible for developing or implementing policies or practices of co-curricular program at the institution. The two lecturers shared an account of their observations towards the development of co-curricular activities at higher institution. Most importantly, the two lecturers provided insights in terms of how students' active involvement in co-curricular activities had significantly supported students in learning especially in the social context. Thus, it was decided to assess the students' involvement in co-curricular activities at this institution.

All the 52 participants were interviewed face-to-face. All the participants went through the second interviews. During the second time interviews, some of the data collection was carried out in focus groups. A total of 104 interviews took place during the study. The profiles of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Number of Participating Colleges and Participants

No	Name of College	Male	Female
1.	College A	4	9
2.	College B	5	11
3.	College C	5	8

In total, 52 participants were interviewed, 13 participants from College A, 16 from College B and 13 from College C. In this context, the data obtained from all the participants were collectively analyzed to uncover common themes and sub-themes on the learning experience of the survivors in Aceh after the tsunami. The data analysis involved two phases. The first phase was the analysis of qualitative data in terms of interviews, observational notes and documents amongst the participants. At the second phase, all taped interviews were transcribed. The qualitative data were content analyzed case by case, using inductive and deductive analysis. Data reduction was then conducted to identify common themes and sub-themes in all the cases.

It is the aim of this paper to highlight only the issues focused on their involvement in co-curricular activities in supporting their learning in the subsequent years for their academic

programs. For the purpose of confidentiality, and adhering to the ethics on research, the actual names of the colleges and participants were not used in this paper. The findings are presented in the following section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results on the assessment of the learning experience during co-curricular activities of the first year students at the higher education are presented and discussed in this section. The assessment was carried out based on the four areas below:

1. How did co-curricular activities help to strengthen social adaptation?
2. How did co-curricular activities foster community engagement?
3. How did co-curricular activities stimulate leadership?
4. What were the challenges faced by students participating in co-curricular activities?

Co-curricular activities strengthen social adaptation

In general, co-curricular activities are an extension of a good education program and they support the academic mission. Hence, co-curricular activities allow students to build social cooperation as they mixed with different personalities upon registration at the institution.

The first year undergraduates possess different forms of tertiary education qualifications such as the STPM (Malaysian Higher Certificate), Matriculation Certificates or Diplomas. Therefore, students are not only from different backgrounds, they also have different interests and experiences. They enter a university with various perceptions and interpretations of the education at institutions of higher learning. The students reported that the academic context was stressful and challenging. However, it was during the co-curricular programs that they loosened up and mixed around freely. Excerpt 1 expresses what a female student in College A recalled her in experience.

Excerpt 1:

It is more relax during the meetings. The social circle is mixed. And, we basically have different race, different achievement in academic but we have the same interest towards that particular outdoor activity, so it is so much easier to adapt and adjust. We settle fast at this leisure activity.

When students share the same interest in an activity, they found that it helped them to strengthen their spirit in terms of building cooperation. Interestingly, the students may be overwhelmed by their peers' similarities, but they recognized the differences and hence made adjustments to fit into the group. They learned to interpret their friends' utterances and intentions and to respect each other when working together. A male student from College C made a remark in conjunction with this matter as expressed in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2:

Sometimes we misunderstood people of the way they think and do thing. But after listening and sharing, we begin to see their ways, we learn to give cooperation even if it is not the way we do things. It is one of the ways. Most important it worked for everybody.

A female student from College B stated that it was crucial for an individual to prepare to change when it came to being able to work in a larger social group. She shared her opinion in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3.

Our roles are different now. Everybody has to do something; We must change some of our old habits if it does not go in line with others. Then, it makes life easier. We need to change a little, may be a little at a time...

Being sensitive is another important element as the students come from different ethnic groups, different socio-economic backgrounds and different religions. However, if an individual observed others as another individual, this moral adaptation is not difficult but it is important. A female student from College C strongly supported the above statement as she put forth her thinking in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4.

We came from a multi-racial society. Fundamentally some of the things we are aware of when we mix around. But at this level, we are expected to be more mature la. I am what I am. But people also have the same rights. So, basically, we have to be a bit more considerate and sensitive towards others. To avoid not good things amongst ourselves... In coco is easier as we do not compete here. .

In sum, co-curricular activities serve as a platform for students to mix around. During the interactions, students made adjustments and learn to accept each other despite their diverse background. They began to reflect on their perceptions about assumptions which they had been holding on to, they construe new meanings and eventually they formed new perspectives and extended their meaning making. The first year students change some of their old habits many times in order to fit in a social group more effectively.

Co-curricular foster community engagement

As highlighted earlier, the co-curricular program is to ‘create and practice a sense of responsibility and respect towards others’. During co-curricular activities, it is the students, the

youth that can build community. This scenario is supported by a male student from College A. He said it in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5:

When young people from different racial, ethnic, economic and educational circumstances work together in close quarters, they come to trust each other and depend on each other. Things can work out. It is not so difficult for us.

The students or their youth service can build up the young people themselves. When young people engage in community service, they become valued, competent resources rather than clients of social institutions such as schools, and gain self-satisfaction and respect as shared by a male student from College C in Excerpt 6:

Excerpt 6:

As young people, we can contribute. As long as people appreciate we are OK. When we do often with the community, we gain their respect and we respect them too. It is two ways.

Interestingly, it was found that the students gained a sense of connection to the larger communities in which they lived in if they were involved in the activities of co-curricular at the institution. A female student from College B elaborated in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7:

We are Ok in our studies. It is going round to be with people is so meaningful. We can use their experience and reflect on our actions. It helps us to understand people and also us.

The students who were involved in co-curricular activities felt they not only learned to foster community engagement, but also create such ties through their shared learning. In this context, the students learned to contribute to the community and the learning experience within the local community enabled them to reflect on the people they work with. This created new learning amongst the students. Eventually, they would grow and develop and become more mature, more critical in life.

Co-curricular activities stimulate leadership

Generally co-curricular activities are designed to be in groups and amongst people. The tasks are basically goal and people oriented. Both individual and group activities can teach students the importance of vigilance, hard work, attention to detail, patience and persistence in the time of setbacks. Group activities encourage cooperation and teamwork. One of the female students from

College C shared her experience of how her leadership talent was tapped into, as explained in Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8:

I am no leader. But when I take part in many activities outside the classroom, I realized I can lead. And, its good to find out I have the potentials. I just have to work at the skills ...like talking to people...

The co-curricular activities either individual or group projects, provide a platform for the students to identify their own hidden potential. The awareness and acceptance of their own qualities would benefit the students in their studies, their jobs, their personal lives, as well as help them to be responsible and successful adults (Drucker, 2007). A male student from College A felt it was during one of the projects he was involved in that he further polished his leadership skills as expressed in Excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9:

It was in the middle of the project..., people kind of given up as we are not going to make it. I suddenly saw some hope and I decided to convince my friends to hang in and re work on the project. They believed me and we actually made it. We completed the project and it was a good work together.

Challenges of participating in co-curricular activities

The analysis on the challenges that students faced with participating in co-curricular activities can be described with the sub-themes as 1. Recognitions of the co-curricular credit; 2. Respectful of students' choice of activities; and 3. Support from the institution.

Recognitions of the co-curricular credits

The co-curricular program is meant to be compulsory for the students. Majority of the students find participating in co-curricular activities eventually benefit them. However, the credits given to such involvement are not consistent. Certain administrative or management give emphasis to a student's involvement and complimentary allowances are secured through active participation. A student from College A explained the problem as given in Excerpt 10

Excerpt 10:

We are forced into and yet no recognition is actually given. You see, it takes up our time and we will be penalized if we missed lectures. Anyway, we manage because at this university we have to learn...

Indeed, getting involved in co-curricular activities could be exhaustive and sometimes it jeopardised the students' academic performance. But, a student form College B described that

generally students who could afford to spend time and energy towards co-curricular activities were also good in their academic standing. She put forwards her views in Excerpt 11.

Excerpt 11:

We know how much to get involved most time. If it is taking up too much of our time and our study slack. We will sort of minimize some of the unimportant stuff. At the end of the day, it is the academic results matters...you believe it?

Respectful for the students' choice of activities

Despite the challenges, students who were actively involved in co-curricular activities felt that students should be given the choice of their preferred activities and some of their basic rights, for example, their opinions being considered. A male student in College B actually said this in Excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12:

Don't make it compulsory one uniform, one sport etc. Students know what they want at these outdoor things. We should be respected of our choice of activities. We would be happier if we could do activities that we like. For example, some students do not like so much about sports you know...

Support from the administrative

In order to participate in co-curricular activities and be involved actively, students felt it was of utmost importance to gain support from the administrative authorities or management. It was crucial to have the support as the students not only need their approval to carry out certain projects, but their need to have the understanding from various party as sometimes their involvement did interrupt their academic schedule. If a class replacement was possible it would encourage the students to continue to participate. A female student from College C put forth her opinion in Excerpt 13.

Excerpt 13.

It is important for them to understand and support. Because when comes to attendance or marks or any other credits, we need the lecturer's support. The management people also have to be flexible. Sometimes, it is just too bad, things happen at one time. We have to split ourselves. But if the understanding is there, there should be no problem.

The above account provides evidence that students shared some of the challenges they faced in participating in co-curricular activities. On one hand, the students felt the importance of getting involved in co-curricular activities. On the other hand, they were also concerned about missing classes and insufficient time for them to complete a certain academic project. This situation might

cause problems to them to have equal time and energy for both academic and co-curricular. To avoid such dilemma, the higher education institution could probably make co-curricular activities more structured but flexible. For instance, just like in the academic courses, students could choose the co-curricular activities as electives or audit the activities. This would allow students to feel in control of their own involvement and hence they would be able to perform well in academic as well as co-curricular tasks.

Practical Implications of Students' Involvement in Co-curricular Activities

The findings showed that the benefits of students' involvement in co-curricular activities support their learning in the subsequent years of the academic program. Their involvement facilitated them in learning through various ways such as their social adaptation was strengthened; they fostered better community engagement and were more encouraged and ready for leadership. The results or outcomes of their involvement in co-curricular was an expansion of their existing knowledge; resulting in the participants to continue to learn. The times spent at the co-curricular activities were a meaningful experience. As with most knowledge could be acquired through materials, the co-curricular program enhanced the holistic development amongst the students in the campus (William, 2002). In brief, effective co-curricular programs enable students to acquire value added skills and knowledge to function more intelligently in a changing world.

The findings also revealed that stakeholders demand that co-curricular should be made as part of the qualifying criteria as entry requirements into public universities (Education in Malaysia, 2013). Thus, the emphasis for co-curricular activities should be encouraged as parents and stakeholders see the benefits of co-curricular activities for the students. Many agreed that students should not be evaluated based on academic achievement alone but also on activities which would help build a well-rounded individuals (Chi et al, 2011).

In line with that, in 2009 the Higher Education Ministry confirmed and clarified that co-curricular activities would make up 10% of entry requirement to public universities. It indicates that co-curricular activities play an important part in a student's development.

With the acceptance of co-curricular activities as part of the academic program, the education stakeholders revealed that they intended to improve the structure and the content of the co-curricular in the following areas: co-curricular program and learning system, students' involvement and their respective interest. The students' interests, their choice of activities within their environment were some of the conditions which should be given emphasis if higher education authorities wanted to improve the co-curricular activities (Yasmin Haji Othman, 2009).

The results also showed that the challenges faced by the students towards the involvement of co-curricular activities in the three areas, namely, the recognition of the credits from co-curricular activities, their needs, and the support from administration. The co-curricular program should encompass these elements despite the constraints. Nevertheless, it was observed that colleges which participated in this assessment had initiated interesting activities in gaining the respect and interest of the stakeholders of co-curricular activities.

It was reported by Jane and Chuah (2013) that co-curricular courses can be used as a platform to develop students' generic skill. In other words, participating in co-curricular activities

and projects, enable the students to interact within the socio-cultural context. It also means the experiences allow students be a more holistic, contextual understanding of a culture.

In addition, fostering non-academic quality in students is a priority. It is believed leadership among students can be done so in its sociocultural context. In a study by Hallinger (2004), stating that educational change comes about by the engagement of leader with staff. Co-curricular such as student leadership and mentoring programs can be used to model effective leadership for students.

During the process of assessment, it was found that these colleges conducted interesting and creative activities or projects as part of informal learning during co-curricular activities. These activities support students' learning in the future. The special activities were found to be aligned with the aims of the co-curricular program. For instance, to enhance leadership skills amongst students as stipulated in the aims, the co-curricular projects were planned, organized and run by the students themselves. These co-curricular activities had, in more ways than one, increased the sense of responsibility of the students. They also have positive implications on the improvement of co-curricular activities in institutions of higher education through active involvement of the different stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the co-curricular program as found by Tung in her study (2008).

It is vital to consider the outcomes of co-curricular brought to individuals. Hence, these criteria as be adapted to policy making and university administrators seek to improve in higher education in order to support students' learning in general.

CONCLUSION

The study has identified the benefits of students' involvement in co-curricular activities. The beneficial aspects focused in this paper are the strength on social adaptation amongst students. Another aspect of learning which is important is their engagement of community services. These help students to be more people oriented and to be appreciative of their surroundings. Finally, the individual and group activities provide enormous opportunity for the students to develop leadership skills which would eventually enhance their roles in the society or nation.

It can be concluded that the involvement in co-curricular activities seem to expedite students adaptation and adjustment in the social circle. The significance of social adaptation and the role of developing leadership through co-curricular activities enhance their ability and competence to face challenges in the upcoming learning for the next three years at higher education institutions.

The study suggests that the co-curricular program should be tailored to the needs and interest of the students. This is important as their interests are catered to, and hence they would be able to find ways to overcome those challenges they face in participating in co-curricular activities. The students should be given certain autonomy in terms of their choice of activities they may want to get involved in. In sum, it appears that co-curricular efforts are more crucial now that ever. The study adds knowledge to the field in educational management specifically around the theme of non-academic programs. Future research is needed to investigate how co-curricular programs enhance students' performance. Thus, it can be concluded students' co-curricular programs should be emphasized in the planning and implementation of curriculum development.

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