

Factors Influencing the Sustainability of Service Learning (SULAM) Projects: Insights from Malaysian University Lecturers

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ABSTRACT

Service-learning is an educational strategy that blends academic objectives with community involvement. In Malaysia, SULAM (Service-Learning Malaysia – University for Society) has been implemented in Malaysian higher education providers as a pedagogical approach to enhance university students' learning. Despite its potential benefits, the sustainability of SULAM projects remains a critical concern. This study examines the factors influencing the sustainability of SULAM projects from the perspective of Malaysian university lecturers and their experience with SULAM projects. A qualitative approach was used in this study to gain insights into these factors. Focus group discussions using semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 experienced lecturers who are SULAM implementors from selected universities in West and East Malaysia. Their responses were subjected to thematic analysis. A total of eight themes were identified to address the research questions. Five themes emerged as key determinants of the SULAM project's sustainability. They are selection of community, financial support, collaboration and cooperation, university governance framework, and sustainable leadership. Next, three themes: motivation, adaptation and commitment, and institutional support, affect lecturers' experience and perception of the implementation of the SULAM project in the context of Malaysian Higher Education. These findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to sustain service-learning projects and highlight the vital role that internal and external support networks play in fostering meaningful, long-term community involvement through SULAM. The research reveals the complexity of sustaining service-learning projects in higher education, especially the need to incorporate administrative, financial, and community involvement. Further research should explore other sustainability factors, their impact on student learning outcomes, and longitudinal studies to track long-term effects.

Keywords: Factors influencing, higher education, Malaysian lecturer involvement, project sustainability, semi-structured interview, SULAM programme

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education rebranded and redefined service learning as SULAM (Service-Learning Malaysia - University for Society), distinguishing it from volunteerism and community service. Service-learning is a credit-bearing, course-structured academic curriculum. It is an educational experience in which the student engages in a structured service activity that addresses identified community needs, reflects on the service activity and experiences, and achieves desired learning outcomes, to gain a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation for the discipline, a stronger sense of personal values, and civic responsibility (MOE, 2019).

As a teaching approach, SULAM programmes help to develop students' critical thinking and learning abilities as well as a strong sense of civic participation and responsibility. Through dynamic service-learning pedagogy,

students can apply their academic knowledge to address real-world community issues by integrating classroom theory with practical experience. By witnessing how their academic knowledge impacts the resolution of societal problems through active engagement in service projects, they enhance their educational experience and advance their personal and professional growth, promoting sustainable development and social responsibility. For this to happen, corporate social responsibility (CSR) needs to be carefully designed to meet learning and social objectives, garner stakeholder support, involve all community partners, and address real community needs.

SULAM also emphasises the importance of influencing rural development strategies to mitigate social disparities and enhance community well-being. By engaging in SULAM activities, students will receive a well-rounded education that balances intellectual growth and social responsibility, enabling them to become entrepreneurial leaders who can make a significant impact on society and contribute to the country's advancement.

Although SULAM programmes primarily involve students and the community, it is the lecturers who initiate the planning and the overall execution. Thus, the involvement of lecturers in service learning is crucial for the success and effectiveness of SULAM programmes. Based on the SULAM Playbook (2019), the roles the lecturers play throughout the process include strategising and planning, facilitating, and assessing service-learning experiences. They need to design a curriculum that integrates service activities with academic content, ensuring that learning objectives are met while addressing community needs. To ensure SULAM's sustainability, the lecturers must identify, establish, and nurture partnerships with various stakeholders. These include community partners, government and non-governmental agencies, other relevant stakeholders, related agencies, and funders, who advocate for and integrate service-learning into institutional practices.

Despite the increase in SULAM courses and university participation, challenges persist. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of university administration and pedagogy in creating impactful service-learning environments (Chng, Leibowitz, & Mårtensson, 2020). In addition, challenges in pedagogy, community engagement, student involvement, faculty support, and institutional coordination have also been identified (Yusuf et al., 2020). Although a growing body of research (Mergler et al., 2017) highlights service learning as a transformational pedagogy, primarily from the student perspective, a significant gap remains in the literature that examines the experiences and perspectives of lecturers involved in SULAM programmes. The role of lecturers as the central agents in facilitating, planning and executing SULAM is currently largely underexplored. Consequently, there is limited empirical insight into the institutional, pedagogical, and contextual factors that influence sustainability from the lecturers' perspectives. Closing this gap is essential to gaining a thorough understanding of the benefits of service-learning and to provide the guidance needed to develop plans that facilitate its incorporation into higher education curricula. Thus, this study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences and perceptions of university lecturers engaged in SULAM projects.

Therefore, this study aims to explore and evaluate how university lecturers perceive the factors that affect the sustainability of service-learning projects over time, and to gain feedback on their experiences and perceptions of the SULAM project. The following research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: What are the perceived factors that contribute to the sustainability of service-learning projects from the perspective of university lecturers?
- RQ2: How do university lecturers experience and perceive the implementation of SULAM projects in the context of Malaysian higher education?

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Service-Learning and Kolb Experiential Learning Theory

Service learning is defined as an experiential education in which students engage in community service and reflect on their experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). This reflection enables them to gain a better understanding of the course material, the discipline, and its relevance to social demands, as well as develop a stronger sense of civic responsibility. While conducting the activities, students can reformulate assumptions, create new frameworks, and develop perceptions that shape their future actions. Through these potentials, the experiential learning theory proposed by Kolb (1984), which builds upon the foundational work of Dewey (1916, 1933), provides one of the conceptual frameworks for service-learning educators.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Figure 1) is a model that describes the learning-from-experience process individuals undergo through a cyclical process involving four key stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984 & 2015). According to his theory, learning is the process by which experience is transformed into knowledge, and people learn best when they

participate in an ongoing cycle of experience, thinking, reasoning, and applying what they have learned to new situations (Kolb, 1984). This process encourages the development of practical skills and a deeper understanding of ideas or concepts.

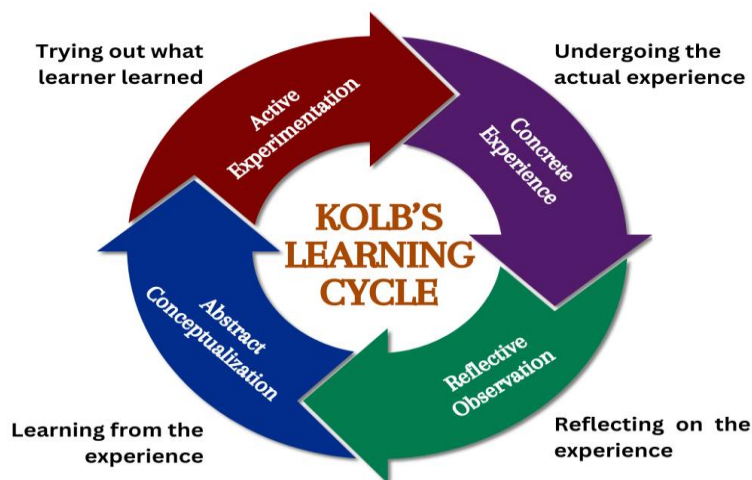


Figure 1: Four key stages of experiential learning in Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory

Most studies on Kolb’s experiential learning theory in service learning have only focused on its relation to students’ service-learning experience (Morris, 2020). Although few researchers have discussed Kolb's theory in the specific context of lecturers’ service-learning experiences, studies have shown that lecturers who have used service-learning as a learning-teaching methodology have experienced changes in their attitudes toward teaching, increased commitment and creativity, and opportunities to interact with real enterprises. They have also shown increases in motivation and satisfaction with their service (Hervás-Torres & Rubio-Alcalá, 2020).

This research proposes how Kolb's experiential learning theory relates to the service-learning experience for lecturers, as illustrated in Figure 2. Lecturers obtain “Concrete Experience” through actively engaging in service-learning projects and interacting with community members and other stakeholders alongside students. Following their service-learning experiences, lecturers engage in “Reflective Observation” by critically reflecting on their actions, observations, interactions and the outcomes of their involvement. Lecturers then move to “Abstract Conceptualisation”, where they conceptualise new strategies and approaches to enhance the effectiveness of their projects, based on the analysis and synthesis of their service-learning experience. Finally, lecturers embark on “Active Experimentation” by implementing new strategies and approaches within their service-learning projects, drawing on insights gained from Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualisation.

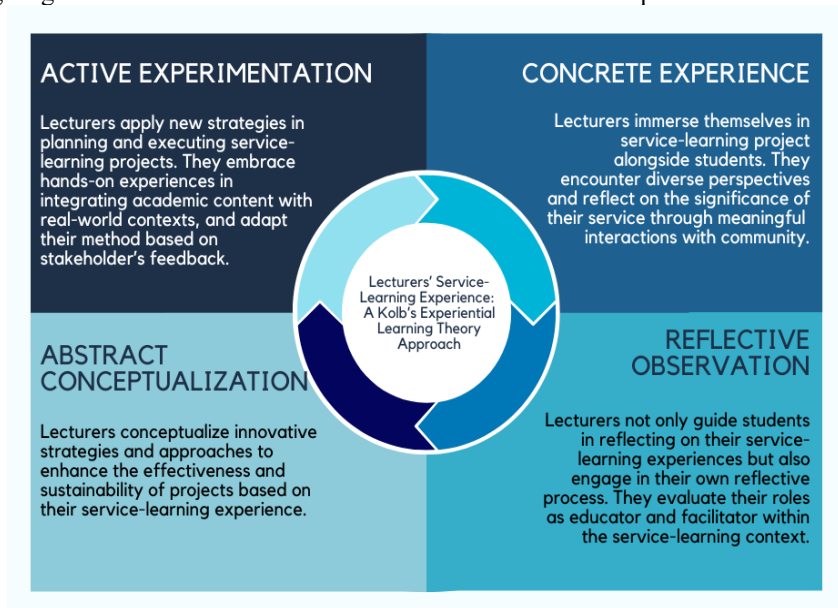


Figure 2: Lecturers’ Service-Learning Experience: A Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory Approach

Understanding lecturers' service-learning experiences is critical to ensuring their effectiveness as facilitators of service-learning projects that benefit both students and community partners, thereby promoting their continuity and sustainability.

Institutional and Bureaucracy Theory in Sustaining Service-Learning

Bureaucracy Theory (Weber, 1947) explains how organisational structure, hierarchy, and formal procedure influence decision-making and resource allocation. Within service-learning, bureaucracy determines how funds are approved, how lecturers obtain permission, and how projects are institutionalised (Bennet et al., 2016). When policies are rigid or slow, lecturer motivation decreases (Pambudi et al., 2025), thereby jeopardising sustainability. Conversely, supportive governance accelerates decision-making and strengthens community partnerships. A recent review by Rathore & Mahesh (2025) examines structural barriers to business education service-learning, noting that bureaucracy prioritises predictability and control but can stifle innovative and reflective learning approaches. Their proposed framework advocates for more flexible governance to enhance the sustainability of service-learning programs. According to Ashikin et al. (2021), the five issues rated as the most critical challenges to the implementation of SULAM among preservice educators included financial constraints, poor time management, virtual implementation barriers, administrative issues, and relationships with the community.

In this study, both Bureaucracy Theory and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory complement each other, explaining how lecturers learn during the SULAM project and how organisational structures enable or restrict that learning. When governance procedures are rigid, the experiential cycle is disrupted; when governance is supportive, lecturers can progress from reflection to innovation and sustain long-term partnerships with communities.

Sustainability of the SULAM Project

Several factors affect the sustainability of SULAM projects and can enhance their long-term impact. They include the local community's level of involvement and support, funding, lecturers' involvement, and a strong connection and collaboration with community members. According to Nur Farah Amirah et al. (2023), a vital aspect of practical needs assessment and knowledge transfer in service-learning initiatives is the establishment of mutual relationships and understanding between universities and communities. This dynamic interaction is essential for enhancing student learning and fostering mutually beneficial collaboration. However, Yusof et al. (2020) found that lecturers face the challenge of building a cooperative relationship with the community or industry due to persistent scheduling constraints that affect both parties. They emphasised the importance of selecting a service-learning course and the students' maturity in gaining a deeper understanding of conceptual knowledge.

Funding for the SULAM projects can affect various aspects of community engagement and sustainability (Wan Nur Arina Dayana, 2024; Siti Idayu Hasan et al., 2023). In his study, Bennett (2016) emphasises the importance of institutional commitment, encompassing organisational structure, procedural details, funding, and stakeholders' active engagement in service-learning initiatives. Without these vital components, all of the stakeholders' efforts, time, and energy invested in the service-learning initiative would be in vain. Although SULAM provides compelling evidence for improving student learning and encouraging community involvement, its execution and longevity depend on how effectively financial constraints are managed and how well all parties and stakeholders collaborate.

In SULAM programmes, lecturers play a multidimensional role that extends beyond traditional teaching to include planning, facilitation, guiding, assessment, and building a symbiotic relationship between academic institutions and the community. They play a significant role in ensuring the success of service learning (Wilson & Devereux, 2014). Other researchers have also posited that the success of service learning relies on its careful planning and clear implementation guidelines (Wurdinger & Allison, 2017; Gerholz, Liszt & Klingsieck, 2017).

METHOD

Research Design

The study explores how university lecturers identify factors that contribute to the sustainability of service-learning initiatives and their experiences and insights regarding the SULAM project. The research design employed in this study is a qualitative multiple-case study. According to Yin (2009) and Stake (2000), the case study technique offers an excellent framework for researchers to analyse a phenomenon, population, or general situation and to answer explanatory research questions, such as 'how' or 'why'.

Participants of Semi-structured Interviews FGD

This study employed a non-probability sampling method with a homogeneous purposive sampling approach, selecting only lecturers who have been involved in the SULAM project for at least five (5) years. The lecturers were selected from three universities, two in West Malaysia and one in East Malaysia. They were recommended by the Academic Excellence Department within the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, as well as the SULAM coordinators at the public universities identified for this study. The selection was also based on their active and consistent participation since 2019, when SULAM was introduced. A total of eleven (11) lecturers from three different public universities in Malaysia participated in this study: five (5) from the east coast and south of West Malaysia, and six (6) from a university in East Malaysia. These lecturers represented diverse regional contexts, which allowed for exploration of varying institutional governance and community partnership practices.

To investigate both research questions in this study, semi-structured interview questions were employed through face-to-face focus group discussions (FGDs) as the instrument. Conducting an FGD enables the collection of rich data, allowing for more information and insights to be obtained quickly compared to a one-to-one interview. The group dynamic also allows participants to build on one another’s responses and generate ideas that they might not have considered in an individual interview. The data obtained accurately reflect the study's actual situation or are closely aligned with it (Chia et al., 2023).

To enhance the validity of the interview questions and minimise bias, the study team collaborated with the three National SULAM technical committees from different universities in Malaysia. This allowed for a thorough review and refining process that took into account a variety of viewpoints. Informed permission was strictly followed throughout this experiment, and ethical issues were given priority. The researchers formally requested permission to conduct research in a letter addressed to the SULAM coordinators at the chosen universities, which clarified the research goals, outlined the expected instructor involvement, and emphasised that their participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of their rights as research subjects, the goals of the study, and the expected duration of the FGD. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences and that their participation was entirely voluntary. Table 1 shows the participants’ demographics.

Table 1: Participants’ Demographics in the Study

	FGD WEST MALAYSIA		FGD EAST MALAYSIA		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
RACE						
Malay	5	45.5	6	54.5	11	100
GENDER						
Female	3	27.3	4	36.4	7	63.6
Male	2	18.2	2	18.2	4	36.4
AGE (YEARS)						
30-39	4	36.4	4	36.4	8	72.7
40-60	1	9.1	2	18.2	3	27.3
ROLE						
Project Coordinator	2	18.2	1	9.1	3	27.3
Project Advisor	3	27.3	3	27.3	6	54.5
Sulam Coordinator	-	-	2	18.2	2	18.2
YEARS OF SERVICE AS LECTURERS						
More Than 10 Years	5	45.5	6	54.5	11	100
YEARS OF INVOLVEMENT IN SULAM						
5-10 Years	4	36.4	4	36.4	8	72.7
More Than 10 Years	1	9.1	2	18.2	3	27.3

Four (4) male and seven (7) female lecturers aged between 30 and 60 participated in this study. Eight (8) had 5–10 years of involvement in SULAM, whereas three (3) had more than 10 years. Of these eleven respondents, three (3) were project coordinators, six (6) project advisors, and two (2) were SULAM coordinators.

In total, four FGDs were conducted; two in West Malaysia and two in East Malaysia. Each FGD consists of 2-4 lecturers, one head of the community and 1-2 researchers. On average, each interview lasted 80-120 minutes and

was conducted at the participants' universities. The interview was conducted in both Malay and English. Among the core questions asked were:

1. What are your views on SULAM programmes?
2. What are your views on the sustainability of SULAM programmes?
3. How does your institution support the SULAM programmes?
4. What are the challenges of working with the community?
5. What is your significant experience during the SULAM project?

With the lecturers' consent, all interview sessions were audio-recorded. Each lecturer was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and protect their identity. To enhance clarity, the overall phases of the research process are illustrated in Figure 3.

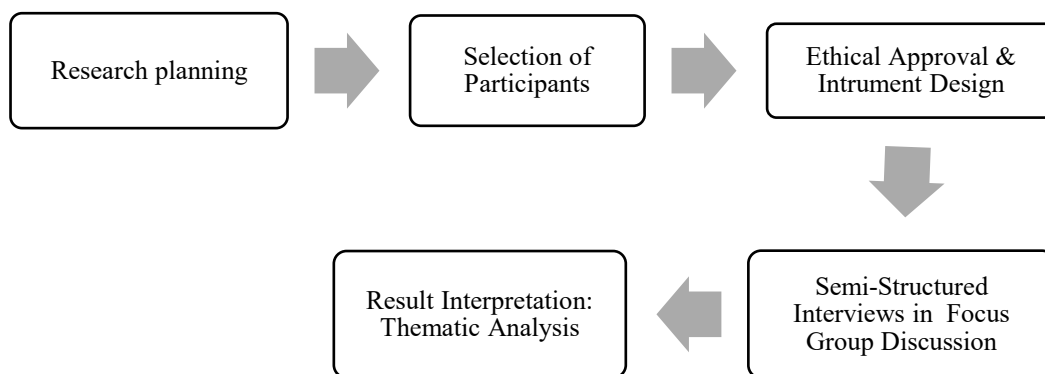


Figure 3: Research Flowchart

DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained in this study were thematically analysed to interpret the interview findings from 11 lecturers at the three selected universities. The data was initially transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. Two (2) English language lecturers verified the translated transcriptions at a local university. The participants verified the translated transcriptions to ensure accuracy, clarity, cultural appropriateness and trustworthiness. The qualitative data analysis involved five steps (see Table 2 below).

All analytical processes were conducted manually by the researchers, with accuracy, triangulation, and auditing performed by expert qualitative researchers at the respective university faculty and at three other universities. The rigorous five-step process ensured the integrity and richness of the data, accurately reflecting participants' experiences and perspectives. The collaborative effort in reviewing and refining themes, combined with high inter-coder reliability, demonstrates the careful consideration given to the analysis. Any disagreements were discussed and resolved until a consensus was achieved. The study's findings are supported by compelling interview excerpts that provide practical insights for stakeholders involved in similar initiatives. The manual approach to data analysis enables in-depth engagement, yielding a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences.

Table 2: Five steps of qualitative data analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis		
1	Familiarising with the Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The data was read 3-4 times, allowing familiarisation and ensuring that all details and subtleties were incorporated into the data analysis. • All memos and notes made throughout the study were reviewed.
2	Developing and Applying Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data in the form of brief phrases that reflected a theme or a concept were categorised using coding. • Following several readings of the interview transcripts, a story draft was created by joining the categories. • The data coding was performed manually, with an inter-coder reliability of 95%.
3	Identifying Themes, Patterns, and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents a pattern or relationship across the data set. • The researcher moved back and forth between the codes obtained earlier to identify commonalities. • Codes are more specific than themes, which are typically created by combining multiple codes. • The data and codes were interpreted as part of the process.
4	Reviewing and Refining the Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After reading through the data snippets three (3) times, the themes were examined to make sure there were discernible variations between them. • The evaluation procedure helped determine whether the themes that emerged were relevant and accurately represented the data, as well as whether any new themes might have been overlooked.
5	Summarising the Data and Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The analysis should present a succinct, logical, cohesive, engaging, and non-repetitive narrative of the story, highlighting the theme’s ubiquity through the selection of striking interview excerpts that encapsulate the main argument to be made.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the factors influencing the sustainability of SULAM projects and explored how university lecturers perceive and respond to their experiences in implementing SULAM. This section presents the research findings derived from analysing the primary data collected through the interview session. The thematic analysis revealed eight themes: (1) Selection of Community, (2) Financial Support, (3) Management of SULAM, (4) University Governance Framework, (5) Sustainable Leadership, (6) Motivation, (7) Adaptation and Commitment, and (8) Institutional Support. Themes 1 - 5 answer the first research question related to the factors affecting SULAM programmes, while Themes 6 - 8 answer the second research question, which was to explore lecturers’ perceived experiences that shape their actions in conducting SULAM.

Research Objective 1: University Lecturers' Perception of Factors Contributing to the Sustainability of SULAM Projects

Based on interviews with 11 lecturers in this study, five primary themes emerged to address the first research objective. They are: Selection of Community, Financial Support, Collaboration and Cooperation, University Governance Framework, and Sustainable Leadership. Each approach is supported by specific examples from the lecturers' interviews.

Theme 1: Selection of Community

During the FGD interviews, the lecturers believe that there are four approaches for selecting communities for SULAM programmes. First, it is the university that selects the community, as exemplified below:

“We choose the community...we go and we observe and then we will offer our expertise based on their needs analysis.” (JL1)

“In identifying the particular community, there are several phases that have to be conducted, from the University side, the community itself, and third parties like the government and state agencies. Sometimes we see the potential of a particular community, but the community themselves are not able to visualise it. So, we need to translate the aspiration and inject inspiration that can help them change for the better.” (JL2)

Second, the students select the community. This is because they had earlier conducted the programmes with the community and stated their preference to continue. The following excerpt illustrates this:

“Sometimes it is the students who select the community. They have started the programme with the school earlier, and they want to extend it.” (JL2)

Third, the community selects the university, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

“Sometimes, it is the community that selects and extends an invitation to universities to collaborate on a project with them. They have seen the benefits and advantages of past programmes in neighbouring communities, or they have read about them on SULAM Facebook.” (JL3)

“The community approaches us. In fact, we do not have a specific programme. However, it is possible that we already have a good rapport with them, or we have a good networking system in place. For example, we may have previously worked on community herb gardens or trained single mothers. When other neighbouring communities see these projects, they will come to us. It is due to our reputation.” (JL2)

Fourth, an intermediary organisation works with the university to identify the community involved. The following interview excerpt by one of the representatives of the industry illustrates this:

“We conduct science programmes, especially related to STEM, to students in the school, higher learning institutions, as well as the community. We invite and collaborate with multiple agencies, universities, ministries, NGOs, and others.” (TSC1)

It augurs well when the community selects the university, reflecting trust and confidence in the university, particularly when the SULAM programmes could deliver success and accomplish the programme’s objectives. The SULAM programmes can be sustained when prior efforts are well received and the community recognises and appreciates the benefits. The feedback also revealed that information on the success of prior SULAM programmes, shared through social media platforms, word of mouth, and observation, influences the community’s decision-making.

Previous research also highlighted that the process of selecting communities for service-learning programs is highly flexible and may be initiated by a variety of sources. In standard practice, universities will select a community partner to align with learning outcomes. However, studies also document a growing emphasis on bottom-up, community-initiated collaborations, where the community themselves identifies needs and seeks partnerships with universities, ensuring mutually beneficial outcomes (Chepkuto, Magak, & Shadrack, 2021; Guseh, 2016; Hamzah, Ahmad Tajuddin, Romly, Wahi, & Syed Aris, 2023; Shah, Preston, & Dimova, 2023). Thus, sustained partnerships enable lecturers and students to re-engage with the same community over time, allowing Kolb’s experiential cycle to continue across the semesters rather than resetting each time.

Theme 2: Financial Support

The financing source for SULAM programmes is crucial, as it has an immediate impact on the size, sustainability, and scope of SULAM projects. Efficient allocation of funds ensures the availability of resources when needed, promoting seamless project implementation and prompt responses to community demands. Without financial support, SULAM programmes cannot be conducted, as this would negatively impact the morale of lecturers, students, and the communities they serve. For example, in East Malaysia, the challenge lies in reaching communities in the state’s interior or those far from universities, as this affects logistics costs. If funding is the problem, then other issues, such as students’ transportation, accommodation, meals, and other essentials, will also be affected. Therefore, a proper budget must account for a range of intangible factors. This indicates that financial strain does not merely affect logistics- it determines whether the project can be initiated at all, influencing lecturers’ willingness to proceed. In this study, some lecturers shared how challenging it was when they lacked

funds for students' transportation to conduct SULAM programmes in their chosen communities. The following example illustrates this:

“There are geographical challenges to bringing students to conduct (SULAM programmes). If we want to go further inland, which involves logging tracks, then it will be challenging.” (SL2)

For the communities, the most important criterion is financial support. They are highly dependent on the university's funds to conduct SULAM programmes. When approaching one of the communities, the university lecturers were informed by the community leader that they would participate only if sufficient funds were available. As exemplified in the interview excerpt below:

“Anyone is welcome to our community, but it is important that they come with sufficient funds ... So, the project can proceed smoothly. Please ensure they come well-prepared with proper arrangements, so that no problems can arise later and burden the host community.” (CL3)

This suggests that the community sees SULAM not as volunteerism but as a resource-dependent partnership. Without adequate funding, community participation and trust diminish.

Two sub-themes have emerged to expand Theme 2 (Financial Support): Diverse Financial Sources (Sub-Theme 2a) and Collaborative Funding Strategies (Sub-Theme 2b).

Sub-theme 2a: Diverse Financing Sources:

Universities employ a range of measures to secure funding for SULAM initiatives. While some institutions have set aside funds for these programmes, such as grants specifically intended for sustainability and community involvement, others look beyond their universities for funding. Collaborations with government departments and ministries, federal and state development agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector businesses, and global organisations such as UNESCO are a few examples. The wide range of financing sources demonstrates the creative strategies lecturers or institutions use to guarantee the sustainability of their SULAM initiatives. The following are shared by the lecturers:

“At University B, we have a fund for SULAM projects, and we also have funds from USR (University Social Responsibility). For the community and its sustainability, we also have another one, the sustainability fund, so it is easy for us to manage the fund.” (SL2)

“ We started the fund with RM60,000 (for the SULAM programmes), but I also obtained a grant from KPT (Ministry of Higher Education), which offered 35 million (ringgit). This is under the protection (of public resources) projects. We managed to gather 300 companies under the Federation of Malaysia...” (SL3)

From a Bureaucracy Theory perspective (Weber, 1947), funding approval serves as a bureaucratic control mechanism: whoever controls the budget controls decision-making authority. When funding procedures are rigid or slow, project continuity becomes jeopardised (Bennet et al., 2016).

Sub-Theme 2b: Collaborative Funding Strategies:

Some lecturers form collaborations and divide financial responsibilities based on the type of community project and the parties involved. This cooperative approach increases the project's overall impact and sustainability by fostering a sense of shared commitment among stakeholders and helping cover various expenditures related to SULAM programmes. The following narrative illustrates this cooperation:

“(For SULAM programmes) We will communicate with the district agency, which in turn, will connect us with the entrepreneurs' association. This is what we refer to as our strategic partners or co-partners. They, in turn, will organise the workshop by sending out official letters to the participants. Since it is a directive from the Village Development and Safety Committee (JPKK), the participants can claim from their respective state representatives.” (SC1)

Collaborative funding distributes responsibility and reduces the dependency on a single institutional source. Shared funding also creates shared responsibility and ownership—a key element of long-term sustainability.

Previous studies also support the idea that service-learning projects are stronger when supported by diverse funding sources, which could increase SULAM programmes' stability, promote shared responsibility, and make

the project more effective and sustainable (Álvarez-Vanegas, Ramani, & Volante, 2024). Additionally, the viability and sustainability of experiential service-learning depend on the proper and sufficient allocation of funding for their execution (Coward, 2010). This would foster enduring relationships and community engagement while enabling institutions to serve their needs better.

In conclusion, financial support acts as the sustainability engine of SULAM. Funding legitimises community engagement, shapes lecturer motivation, and determines whether experiential learning can occur. Thus, financial governance is not a peripheral administrative task, but a central determinant of programme sustainability.

Theme 3: Management of SULAM

The third theme that emerged is the management of SULAM, which is further subdivided into two sub-themes: Cooperation (Sub-Theme 3a) and Collaboration, and Micromanagement of SULAM (Sub-Theme 3b).

Sub-Theme 3a: Cooperation and Collaboration

Strategic partnerships at multiple levels significantly contribute to the success of SULAM programmes. This includes inter-university, inter-faculty, interdisciplinary collaborations, as well as partnerships with outside agencies and organisations. These collaborative endeavours not only capitalise on the distinct abilities and assets of every member but also encourage a multidisciplinary approach to resolving communal issues. At the university level, it can be as follows:

“We have inter-university, inter-faculty and inter-disciplinary cooperation and collaboration (when conducting SULAM programmes).” (JL2)

This indicates that when collaboration is shared across faculties and institutions, responsibility is distributed, and SULAM does not rely solely on a single lecturer to sustain the project. In most cases, there is collaboration and cooperation between universities and other agencies, such as various federal ministries, government bodies, state agencies, district offices, the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and political bodies. This model promotes academic learning and civic responsibility and could be scaled up to address societal challenges and enhance educational impact. The following interview excerpt demonstrates the coordination between the university and other agencies.

“... University S and the agency work side by side with the district office and community leaders to develop the community.” (JCL1)

“(The university) is the mastermind and coordinates different disciplines and works really closely with other agencies because the funds are from them.” (JL2)

“SULAM needs energy, ideas and expertise. Since energy comes from university students, the role of the agencies must be beneficial. The private sector has CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), but they do not have the time or the energy to handle things, for example, helping to plant (trees or herbs, etc).” (JL5)

“The old abandoned buildings (on the island) have been turned into various galleries. Both agencies work side by side with the district office and community leaders to develop the community. Previously, the state agencies have been helping to improve the infrastructure and facilities for the community, but when University S comes here, both the infrastructure and knowledge from the university are present.” (JCL1)

Liaising with the various agencies on their potential roles post-SULAM is crucial to identify who can serve as a guiding hand to support the communities that have been exposed to the diverse skills and knowledge delivered by the university. This partnership not only addresses immediate community needs but also contributes to a sustainable model of community development, where educational initiatives and community welfare are interlinked. The potential for utilising company resources and expertise in service-learning projects is indicated by the mention of the private sector's involvement through CSR activities. The enthusiasm, concepts, and knowledge required for SULAM, which originated from university students and were bolstered by contributions from the commercial sector, indicate a collaborative approach that extends beyond the public sector and involves a broader range of educational partners.

Sharing authority across agencies reduces procedural bottlenecks by dispersing decision-making authority away from a single approving body (Bureaucracy Theory). When multiple institutions share ownership, approvals are faster and implementation smoother, strengthening sustainability.

Sub-Theme 3b: Micromanagement of SULAM programmes

Some communities are very particular about how the project should be carried out. They seem to prefer doing things their own way. The following is shared by one lecturer on the views of a community leader:

“They (the community leader) told us, they have their own approach. They will inform us on how we can cooperate. We can bring our (university’s) way, but not entirely; we need to sit down with them and reach an agreement. If there is no cooperation, things cannot move, then it will be difficult to succeed.” (SCL1)

According to Teo & Loosemore (2017), effective community engagement strategies require project managers to adopt trust-building measures early in projects and to develop an intimate understanding of community concerns and social structures. Thus, sustainability depends not only on collaboration but on the quality of collaboration. Shared leadership sustains the SULAM project; micromanagement restricts it.

Theme 4: University Governance Framework

The study's findings shed light on the governing structures of the SULAM at various universities. The aforementioned frameworks illustrate variations in the integration and management of SULAM across institutions, accounting for their distinct approaches to administrative structure, faculty participation, and community outreach.

“SULAM is under the purview of curriculum development at University B. It is the centre of academic development. At the sustainability centre, we engage with the community and closely monitor and report on our progress. At the faculty level, we will link with the Vice Vice Chancellor of Industry and the community. Each working paper from the faculty will be evaluated and approved at a meeting”. (SL2)

“At University E, we have a specific course coordinator on the faculty, together with other lecturers, to manage this academic programme SULAM. This programme comes directly under the Academic Vice Chancellor, so we report to him”. (SL3)

“At University S, there are three: under the Academics, under Community Office, and one more under Students’ Affairs, but Community Office is actually under CSR, but it can be tabbed under both, SULAM and CSR”. (SR1)

These narratives highlighted the variety of strategies used to manage SULAM programmes across different universities. This variation demonstrates how SULAM can be tailored to each university's unique organisational culture, top priorities, and vision and mission. The findings suggest that there might be more than one "correct" way to execute a SULAM programme. All the various strategies, whether coordinated by specialised course coordinators, centralised within a specific centre or unit, or integrated across academic, community outreach, and student affairs departments, offer their own benefits. The success of the framework in creating a conducive environment for SULAM operations is more important than the structure's homogeneity.

A governance model is deemed successful if it ensures the satisfaction and participation of all parties and stakeholders, prevents unnecessary delays in SULAM operations, and fosters an environment that is conducive to the execution and growth of these initiatives. This flexibility not only embodies the creative spirit of service learning but also emphasises the importance of adapting programme administration to best serve the needs of faculty, students, the community, and industry partners.

Consequently, it is essential to view the diversity of governance structures as a strength of the SULAM project, demonstrating the programme's adaptability to various institutional settings. This adaptability ensures that, regardless of the chosen administrative model, SULAM can continue to provide valuable educational opportunities and benefits to society.

Theme 5: Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable leadership is an approach that enables organisations to make informed decisions and undertake activities that promote long-term well-being for the community by balancing economic, social, and environmental

considerations. In this study, the lecturers emphasised the importance of sustainable leadership to ensure that SULAM programmes continue to thrive in the future. As shared by the following lecturers:

“Some communities are too dependent on the university team's leadership. They (the community leaders) told us they are worried who can take over to manage and continue the programmes that we started. They lack motivation to continue the initiative, despite knowing the financial benefits. Most people lack confidence in following through because of the fear of failure. They seem to require a long-term guiding hand to maintain their interest, passion, and drive to continue the programme.” (JL5)

“The programmes need to run for at least 3 years before we know the success. The community still needs guidance from the university.” (JL6)

Another example of the difficulty in sustaining SULAM programmes is as follows: The community was initially taught how to develop an official website. Once the website was operational, the community saw an increase in overseas tourists, which helped boost its economy. However, after the university team left, no one was tech-savvy enough to handle the website's difficulties. In another community, they were taught about beekeeping. When the university left, the community needed additional expertise to maintain their beehives and establish a market for selling honey. In the end, the initiative was terminated since they lacked the confidence to proceed on their own. Similarly, the batik chanting project introduced in the community was also cancelled, as the community's initial enthusiasm waned once the university team departed.

Thus, sustainable leadership is identified as a key factor in determining the success and sustainability of SULAM programmes. The leadership would include community leader support, community ownership of projects, holistic student development, and strategic partnerships with community-based groups, industry, and government.

Research Objective 2: University Lecturers' Experience and Perception of the Implementation of the SULAM project in the context of Malaysian Higher Education

The analysis of the FGD data reveals three key themes: Motivation, Adaptation and Commitment, and Institutional Support.

Theme 6: Motivation

Besides the formal environment and course quality, the human element — specifically the lecturers themselves — is identified as crucial for the successful development and implementation of service learning. Motivated and competent lecturers are indispensable for offering any service-learning format. Service learning entails an augmented workload for lecturers. However, it also holds the promise of yielding exceptional learning outcomes, fostering enjoyment among all participants involved in the SULAM programmes, and making positive contributions to societal advancement. Therefore, lecturers' responses underscore that motivation is a prerequisite for involvement in service learning.

“Lecturers need to have a high level of determination (to ensure the community project is successful). They must be willing to sacrifice their nights and their weekends. It is not easy to integrate into the local community, especially among the village people. We need initiatives to guide them, especially in the early years. The impact is important, it is massive.” (JL2)

Other lecturers concurred and stated the following:

“The commitment needed is huge, not just 2-3 credit hours, but much more than that, because from the beginning we need to start with the students, giving opinions, their understanding. Then we have to bring the students to the community. Only then will we have a final say on which project to embark on. After that, there will be the planning and the execution. This is followed by reflection. So, the involvement will be from the start of the semester until the end.” (JL5)

“To develop and help the community to succeed, a lecturer must have internal and external passion and love to develop a society or community. We need to identify the community and other key stakeholders, and then assess the project's potential impact. In Indonesia, the process is lengthy —spanning 3 months in a specific area —but lacks continuity. So, what we have done is to preserve the particular community and be there for at least 3 years to enable us to see the impact made.” (JL6)

Recent research suggests that both lecturers and students can be encouraged to engage in service-learning when their efforts are formally recognised and when institutions explicitly affirm their commitment to socially responsible teaching (Moreira, P. A. et. al., 2025).

Apart from the lecturer's motivation, sustaining the community's interest and motivation is another challenge in managing SULAM programmes, especially those related to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and marketing. One way to overcome this is by collaborating with another faculty from the same university to guide the community on effective marketing strategies and inform them about the various development agencies they can contact for financial assistance, as illustrated below:

“They have now been exposed to ICT, but they still need further guidance to improve their socio-economy. For example, this includes learning how to obtain government financial assistance, applying for grants, and conducting marketing, among other things. So, this programme has been put forward to the Business Faculty for them to continue.” (JL2)

Theme 7: Adaptation and Commitment

Lecturers also need to adapt quickly to changing conditions when conducting SULAM programmes. One important component of this adaptation is the difficulty of matching community perceptions with the objectives of SULAM programmes. Lecturers' adaptability is put to the test by the erratic nature of community commitment and the accessibility of information. Communities may not immediately perceive the advantages of these programmes and may even think they are a waste of time, as one instructor pointed out:

“Initially, they agreed (with the programme proposed). We even have an agreement form to facilitate its implementation. Then, at the end, they said they do not want to, but they want to change (they keep changing). Sometimes, the information is insufficient for us to do the programme. So, it is very challenging.....” (SL6)

These kinds of situations mirror the difficulties of operating in real-world environments where uncertainty is a constant. Due to these obstacles, planning and execution must be proactive, accounting for potential changes and incorporating strategies to keep the project moving forward. As exemplified in the following excerpt:

“There is a need to be flexible in our ideas...for them (the community), they cannot see, or they are not clear (the benefits) in the beginning. They feel it is a waste of time. (We need to identify) What is important to them. The knowledge of society is limited. So, when undertaking these (SULAM) programmes, we cannot easily give up, because, as academics, we are the ones who can see... they cannot see the change we are trying to make for them in the future. As we possess the knowledge, this is our opportunity to give back to society. Dealing with society, we have to have lots of patience in order to succeed.” (JL5)

Due to this perceived gap, lecturers must draw on their academic knowledge and communicate empathetically to highlight the projects' long-term significance. It emphasises the value of fostering mutual respect and understanding, as well as the role that educators play in serving as links between the welfare of the community and scholarly knowledge. As noted by recent studies, even when programmes are designed according to best practices and supported by structured frameworks, civic learning does not occur automatically. Educators seeking to implement service-learning as a civic pedagogy must thoughtfully consider how to design and adapt academic service-learning within their specific institutional contexts, recognising that civic learning can take various forms depending on the environment (Lin et al., 2025).

Lastly, before meeting with community leaders to discuss the SULAM programme, lecturers need to brief their students on how to interact with adults in the rural community and assist their learning. Students need to adjust their level of thinking and communicate effectively with them. The gap between the communities can be further reduced when both sides actively show care and support for one another, thereby creating a stronger sense of community (Mohd Sharif, Shaharuddin, Sirri, Ramli, 2024). During the FGDs, some comments in this study revealed that the participants in the community struggled to grasp the academic language used, stating, “It is too hard,” or “we cannot understand”, or “It is too academic.” This, in turn, can lead to loss of interest and boredom. When information fails to transfer, a communication breakdown occurs. Thus, knowing how to interact with the locals and understanding their local customs and etiquette is crucial to sustaining the SULAM programmes.

Theme 8: Institutional support

From a lecturer's perspective, institutional support is not confined to the university; rather, it extends to external stakeholders, including government institutions, NGOs, and various agencies, all of which significantly contribute to the effective implementation of the SULAM project. Institutions will need to allocate resources towards establishing professional networks for this purpose. Service-learning operates at the intersection of research, teaching, and administration, aiming to make a tangible impact on society. This necessitates a collaborative approach involving both faculty and professional support units, such as centres for teaching and learning and transfer offices for community engagement. These support offices can play a pivotal role by facilitating the exchange of materials and information regarding community partners for service-learning initiatives. For example, the Science Centre has several projects as part of its services. However, they do not have the space to conduct them. Thus, they have approached the university to collaborate, as shared by one lecturer, as follows:

“They already have the content (of the programme), however, they do not have the space to conduct the programme. Therefore, they need to collaborate with other agencies, like the university. This way, we can bring the community to the universities like University X or University Y.” (TL1)

In another example, a school was selected to produce soap and detergent using used oil. However, the main chemical used in the saponification process is sodium hydroxide. As these were needed in bulk, other agencies (in this case, another university) were requested to support the programme. The following excerpt illustrates this:

“Sodium hydroxide is hard to get. To buy it in large quantities, we need a permit. In this project, if the students from the school collect about 5kg of used oil per week, that’s quite a lot. So, to process more oil, more sodium hydroxide is needed. Thus, I would need to collaborate with University X to get access to the chemicals and the possibility of using their labs for the soap-making.” (TL2)

Thus, integrating service-learning into faculty activities also requires cooperation among lecturers from different universities. Service-learning is considered an aspect of ongoing professional development and organisational enhancement for lecturers. Novice lecturers, in particular, stand to benefit from such services (Resch, K, 2022). A summary of the emerging themes is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Derived from Thematic Analysis

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-themes
1. Factors Contributing to the Sustainability of SULAM Projects	1. Selection of Community	
	2. Financial Support	2a. Diverse Financing Sources 2b. Collaborative Funding Strategies
	3. Management of SULAM	3a: Cooperation and Collaboration 3b: Micromanagement of SULAM programmes
	4. University Governance Framework	
	5. Sustainable Leadership	
2. Lecturer’s experience in shaping perspectives and action to conduct SULAM	6. Motivation	
	7. Adaptation and Commitment	
	8. Institutional support	

Note: The entire results of this study are illustrated in Appendix 1.

CONCLUSION

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory highlights the role of lecturers in SULAM programmes. Lecturers engage in a cycle of Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation, immersing themselves and students in community service activities. They guide students through these stages, translating their reflections into actionable knowledge. The process culminates in Active Experimentation, where lecturers apply these insights to enhance SULAM projects. The challenges include aligning community expectations and securing institutional support.

In addition to experiential learning, the sustainability of SULAM projects can also be interpreted through the lens of Institutional and Bureaucracy Theories. According to Weber's Bureaucracy Theory (1947), university structures, policies, and decision-making hierarchies significantly influence how SULAM initiatives are planned, approved, and executed. Rigid bureaucratic processes may delay implementation and reduce lecturer motivation, whereas flexible and supportive governance can accelerate project approval and foster stronger community partnerships. Meanwhile, Institutional Theory explains how SULAM becomes embedded within the university's norms, routines, and governance culture.

In conclusion, university lecturers perceived that multiple levels of cooperation and collaboration (inter-university, inter-faculty, and interdisciplinary), the significance of financial support, the selection of a community, and the necessity of a supportive university governance framework all contributed to the sustainability of SULAM programmes. Institutional support and community partnerships remain central to sustaining these initiatives, as they reinforce lecturers' motivation, adaptability, and commitment. The institutionalisation of SULAM within the university bureaucracy, supported by flexible administrative processes, ensures continuity, accountability, and long-term societal impact.

For the SULAM initiative to remain sustainable, educational institutions must respond in line with the study's findings and conclusions. Prioritising institutional support and ties to the community helps establish a favourable environment and positive atmosphere. An institution's commitment to civic engagement and to helping communities and students is reflected in its sustainable programmes. Collaborative efforts produce socially conscious leaders with enduring positive impacts. The disparity between higher education and the community can be bridged with the right approach, effective management, and a positive attitude. All the issues raised by this study must be addressed carefully to ensure that the money spent on the programmes is accounted for. Each university must collaborate to give the best for the community. The combined efforts will go a long way toward growing each community and maintaining the initial efforts put in place at the start of the programmes.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE STUDY

Results from this study emphasise the necessity of a multimodal strategy to sustain service-learning initiatives and the critical role of internal and external support networks in promoting significant, long-term community involvement through SULAM. Further research should explore other sustainability factors, their impact on student learning outcomes, and longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of SULAM programmes.

Universities should establish dedicated funds to support the SULAM project, either through internal allocations or by forming partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, or the private sector. This will ensure financial stability and enhance project continuity. Furthermore, at the university level, a national system can be established as a central database to coordinate and manage the various SULAM programmes conducted by different student cohorts across universities nationwide. Both lecturers and students can glean valuable and important information from this database before embarking on their own SULAM programmes. A centralised system would also be proper to ensure that different programmes and projects are conducted at different times of the year.

Similarly, the university's faculties need to ensure that communities are represented in each SULAM programme to avoid students from different faculties sharing the same community, either simultaneously or consecutively. Another important feature of the database is the inclusion of a list of federal, state, and district agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and industry companies that can be contacted to partner with and collaborate with the SULAM programmes. This would facilitate planning and decision-making for executing the different SULAM programmes. It might be beneficial to collect and collate evaluations, responses, complaints, and suggestions from all communities involved in the SULAM programmes across the country, enabling each university to learn from the others. In addition, background information on the community can also be shared. All this information should be shared and made readily available at the national centralised centre.

Additionally, SULAM training programmes need to be expanded to equip lecturers with skills in community and project management, enabling them to address challenges and refine project strategies effectively. Lecturers can

also propose a long-term impact assessment framework to track and measure the SULAM project's effects on all stakeholders, including communities, students, and universities.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample was limited to lecturers from selected universities in West and East Malaysia, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings across all Malaysian higher education institutions. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias. Lastly, the absence of longitudinal data constrains the ability to assess the long-term sustainability and impact of SULAM projects. Future research should incorporate a broader and more diverse participant base, triangulate across multiple data sources, and adopt longitudinal designs to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The authors contributed collectively to the research and writing of this article and declare no conflict of interest. SRSA led the conceptualization and overall coordination of the study, including methodology. ZAZ contributed to the design of the methodology and the community engagement aspect. The corresponding author coordinated the data collection and analysis and led the initial draft of the manuscript. AMDM supported the literature review and assisted in refining the research instruments. RAH and EMSi provided critical input on data interpretation and manuscript review.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

This manuscript is the original work of the authors and has not been published previously, nor is it under consideration for publication elsewhere. The authors affirm that the content of this paper is not copied or plagiarised from any other published work. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring its accuracy and integrity.

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Appendix 1:

University Lecturers’ Perceptions of Factors Contributing to the Sustainability of SULAM Projects

Theme 1: Selection of Community - Approach 1: University-led, Approach 2: Student-led, Approach 3: Community-led, Approach 4: Intermediary-led

Theme	Approach Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 1: Selection of Community	Four approaches used in selecting communities for SULAM programmes	Junior Lecturers, Science teacher	1) University selects community via observation and needs analysis (JL1, JL2). (2) Students select a community to continue programmes. (3) The community selects the university for collaboration due to its reputation and past successes. (4) Intermediary organisations collaborate with the university to identify communities (TSC1).	Emphasizes stakeholder involvement and dynamic collaboration, fostering sustainable partnerships aligned with shared values and educational goals.
Approach 1: University-led	University observes and chooses a community based on needs analysis	Junior Lecturers	(JL1) “We (the lecturers) choose the community...we go and we observe and then we will offer our expertise based on their needs analysis”	Promotes expert-driven selection aligning academic resources with community needs, supporting values-based impact.
Approach 2: Student-led	Students select a community based on the existing programme continuation	Junior Lecturers	(JL2) “Sometimes it is the students who select the community. They have started the programme with the school earlier, and they want to extend it.”	Encourages student continuity and empowerment in community engagement, enhancing learning-practice integration.
Approach 3: Community-led	The community approaches the university for collaboration based on its reputation	Junior Lecturers	(JL2) “... the community approaches us. In fact, we do not have a specific programme, but it is possible that we already have a good rapport with them previously...” (JL3) “Sometimes, it is the community that selects and extends an invitation...”	Builds trust and confidence, strengthening mutual respect and recognition of benefits, which is key to sustainable education partnerships.

Theme	Approach Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Approach 4: Intermediary-led	Collaboration with intermediary organisations to identify communities	Junior Lecturers, Science Teachers	(TSC1) “... we conduct science programmes, especially related to STEM, to students in the school, higher learning institutions, as well as the community. We invite and collaborate with multiple agencies, universities, ministries, NGOs, and others.”	Multistakeholder engagement promotes networked collaboration and diversified support, consistent with inclusive values and sustainability principles.
Summary Insights	Community selection impacts the sustainability of SULAM programmes		“Thus, the approach employed in the selection of a community to conduct the SULAM programmes is considerably an instrumental factor... community selects the university, reflecting trust and confidence...”	Highlights the importance of trust, recognition, communication, and proven success for sustainability; critical for Values-Based Education for Sustainable Development (VBE-ESD).

Theme 2: Financial Support - Sub-Theme 2b: Collaborative Funding Strategies

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 2: Financial Support	Financial sources critically affect the size, scope, and sustainability of SULAM projects	Senior Lecturers, Community Leaders, Science Teachers	<p>“Efficient allocation of funds ensures the availability of resources when needed...”.</p> <p>Logistics challenges, especially in remote areas, are impacting transport and other costs. Community participation depends on sufficient funding.</p>	Adequate funding ensures project sustainability and morale, aligning resources with community needs and institutional goals.
Sub-theme 2a: Diverse Financing Sources	Universities use varied internal and external sources for SULAM funding	Senior Lecturers	<p>(SL2) “... at University B, we have a fund for SULAM projects ... another one, the sustainability fund...”</p> <p>(SL3) “... we started the fund with RM60,000 ... grant from KPT ... 300 companies under the Federation of Malaysia...”</p>	Multiple funding sources exemplify innovative resource mobilization supporting ongoing community engagement and sustainability.
Sub-theme 2b: Collaborative Funding Strategies	Collaboration with multiple partners to share financial responsibilities for SULAM projects	Science Teachers	(SC1) “We will communicate with the district agency, which ... connect us with the entrepreneurs' association ... strategic partners or co-partners...”	A collaborative approach fosters shared responsibility, broader impact, and resource efficiency consistent with VBE principles.
Summary Insights	Financial backing is essential for effective, sustainable SULAM activities	Álvarez-Vanegas et al., (2024); Haji Wahab et al., (2025).	Prior studies confirm that institutional commitment and diverse funding sources are crucial. Proper funding supports logistics, training, and community impact evaluations.	Ensures sustainable service-learning that supports community needs, professional development, and shared educational values.

Theme 3: Management of SULAM - Sub-Theme 3a: Cooperation and Collaboration, Sub-Theme 3b: Micromanagement of SULAM programmes

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 3: Management of SULAM	Management is divided into cooperation & collaboration, and micromanagement	Junior Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Community Leaders	<p>(JL2) “... we have inter-university, inter-faculty and inter-disciplinary cooperation and collaboration (when conducting SULAM programmes).”</p> <p>(JL2) “... they (the community) have now been exposed to ICT, but they still need further guidance...”</p> <p>(JL1) “... University S and the agency work side by side with the district office and community leaders...”</p> <p>(SL1) “... they have their own approach...”</p>	Encourages multidisciplinary collaboration and community empowerment alongside respectful negotiation of local preferences, consistent with values-based education principles.
Sub-theme 3a: Cooperation and Collaboration	Strategic partnerships at multiple levels enhance programme success; collaboration with various agencies and the private sector	Junior Lecturers, Science Teachers	<p>(JL2) “(The university) is the mastermind and coordinates different disciplines and works really closely with other agencies because the funds are from them.”</p> <p>(JL5) “SULAM needs energy, ideas, and expertise.... the private sector has CSR, but they do not have the time or energy...”</p> <p>(JL1) “... the old abandoned buildings ... have been turned</p>	Fosters multidisciplinary teamwork, resource sharing, and sustainable community development, integrating educational and social goals.

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
			into various galleries ...”	
Sub-theme 3b: Micromanagement	Some communities prefer managing project details themselves, requiring negotiation and cooperation for success	Senior Lecturers, Community Leaders	(SL1) “... they (the community leader) told us, they have their own approach. They will inform us on how we can cooperate. We can bring our (university’s) way, but not totally; we need to sit down and discuss with them and agree.”	Highlights respect for community autonomy, necessitating mutual agreement and participatory planning to uphold inclusivity and relevance.
Summary Insights	Strong community partnerships and respect for local management style are key to sustainable, impactful SULAM programmes	Haji Wahab et al., (2025)	Studies underline that strategic partnerships and community leader involvement in planning are essential for program relevance, inclusivity, and sustainability.	Reinforces the critical role of collaboration, inclusiveness, and long-term local engagement in Values-Based Education for Sustainable Development (VBE-ESD).

Theme 4: University Governance Framework

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 4: University Governance Framework	SULAM governance varies across universities, reflecting unique organisational cultures and structures	Senior Lecturers	<p>(SL2) “SULAM is under the purview of curriculum development at University B... faculty papers evaluated and approved at meetings.”</p> <p>(SL3) “... at University E, we have a specific course coordinator... who reports to the Academic Vice Chancellor.”</p> <p>(SL1) “Community Office under CSR, but also linked to SULAM and Students’ Affairs.”</p>	Highlights flexible governance tailored to institutional priorities, fostering inclusive participation and programme effectiveness.
Summary Insights	Various governance models succeed by meeting stakeholder needs, preventing delays, and creating supportive environments		Emphasizes more than one ‘correct’ model; success lies in enabling participation, smooth operation, and adaptability to the needs of faculty, students, and the community. Flexibility encourages innovation and alignment with institutional vision and mission.	Adaptability in governance supports a conducive learning and service environment, crucial for Values-Based Education and Sustainable Development goals.

Theme 5: Sustainable Leadership

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 5: Sustainable Leadership	Leadership that balances economic, social, and environmental factors to sustain SULAM programmes long-term	Junior Lecturers	(JL5) “... some communities are too dependent on the university team's leadership ... lack motivation ... fear of failure ... require a long-term guiding hand...” (JL6) “... programmes need to run for at least 3 years before we know the success ... community still needs guidance.”	Highlights the need to foster community ownership, confidence, and continued support for enduring educational and social impact.
Case Examples	Programmes such as websites, beekeeping, and batik were abandoned after university support ended due to a lack of leadership capacity		Communities gained skills but lacked the confidence and expertise to maintain initiatives independently, leading to project termination after university.	Demonstrates the importance of sustainable leadership for community empowerment and lasting value, in line with VBE principles.
Summary Insights	Sustainable leadership hinges on community support, student development, and strategic partnerships with various sectors		Leadership’s role includes fostering community ownership, promoting holistic student development, and building cross-sector partnerships to ensure programme sustainability and success.	Emphasizes integrated leadership models fostering resilience and shared responsibility, key to Values-Based Education and Sustainable Development (VBE-ESD).

University Lecturers’ Experience and Perception on the Implementation of SULAM

Theme 6: Motivation

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 6: Motivation	Lecturer motivation is critical for successful service learning, requiring high commitment, passion, and continuity	Junior Lecturers	<p>(JL2) “... lecturers need to have a high level of determination ... willing to sacrifice their nights and their weekends... the impact is important, it is massive.”</p> <p>(JL5) “... the commitment needed is huge, not just 2-3 credit hours ... planning, execution, reflection from start to end.”</p> <p>(JL6) “... a lecturer must have internal and external passion and love ... preserve the community for at least 3 years ...”</p>	Emphasizes intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement, vital for deep learning and meaningful community impact, core to values-based education.
Summary Insights	Formal recognition of effort and institutional support can encourage participation in service learning	Moreira et al. (2025)	Studies indicate that formal recognition and institutional commitment to socially responsible teaching boost lecturer and student involvement in service learning.	Institutional affirmation supports motivation, helping foster a culture of responsibility and long-term societal contribution aligned with VBE goals.

Theme 7: Adaptation and Commitment

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 7: Adaptation and Commitment	Lecturers must adapt to shifting community commitment, limited information, and cultural communication challenges.	Senior Lecturers, Junior Lecturers	<p>“... initially, they agreed (with the programme proposed). We even have an agreement form ... they keep changing ... information is insufficient ... it is very challenging ...”</p> <p>(JL5)</p> <p>“... there is a need to be flexible ... they feel it is a waste of time ... as academicians ... this is our opportunity to give back to society ... we have to have lots of patience ...”</p>	Stresses flexibility, patience, cultural sensitivity, and empathetic communication to build mutual respect and sustain community engagement, essential for VBE.
Summary Insights	Effective civic learning requires adaptive, context-sensitive pedagogical approaches and communication tailored to locals.	<p>Lin et al., (2025); FGDs</p> <p>Nurhidayah, M. S. et al., (2024)</p>	<p>Studies emphasize that well-designed service-learning must be adapted to institutional and community contexts to achieve civic learning; poor communication can lead to a loss of interest. Participants noted that community members struggle with academic language, which impacts engagement and comprehension.</p> <p>The gap between the communities can be further reduced when both sides actively show care and support for one another, thereby creating a stronger sense of community.</p>	Highlights the importance of contextualised communication and cultural competence for meaningful educational-community partnerships within VBE frameworks.

Theme 8: Institutional support

Theme	Description	Key Participants	Key Quotes / Points	Relevance to VBE-ESD
Theme 8: Institutional Support	Support extends beyond universities to include governmental, NGO, and agency partnerships for effective SULAM delivery.	Lecturers	(TL1) “... they already have the content ... do not have the space to conduct the programme ... collaborate with other agencies, like the university.” (TL2) “... sodium hydroxide is a bit hard to get ... collaborate with University X to get access to chemicals and labs.”	Emphasizes multi-institutional collaboration, resource sharing, and professional network building essential for sustainable community engagement in education.
Summary Insights	Service-learning integration requires cross-university lecturer cooperation and institutional support for professional growth.	Resch (2023)	Service-learning advances professional development and organisational enhancement, especially benefiting novice lecturers through collaborative faculty activities.	Institutional support fosters continuous learning, skills development, and partnerships aligning with Values-Based Education principles for sustainable academic impact.