

# Navigating Challenges: An Exploration of Professional Life Skills Application Among Undergraduates in the International Community Service Programmes

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## Abstract

Professional life skills stand as crucial factors contributing significantly to undergraduates' academic and employability. Despite their paramount importance, numerous studies have found that undergraduates lack professional skills such as communication and teamwork. This study aimed to identify the challenges in employing professional life skills by undergraduates within the context of international community service programmes in higher education. The qualitative research method was adopted using semi-structured interview questions. The research interviewed four instructors from two different universities who have experience participating in the community service program. The data collected from the interviews were further analysed to answer the research questions. The study found that undergraduates faced many challenges in applying professional life skills to international community service programmes. The study suggested that instructors, universities and policymakers should incorporate life skills into the university curriculum. In addition, Higher education institutions should provide additional training aimed at bolstering skill proficiencies to undergraduates. These proactive steps could bridge the gap and equip undergraduates with the requisite professional life skills essential for success in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** Internalisation, Community Service, Life Skills

## Introduction

Globalisation has impacted multiple facets of society, notably education. Across the globe, higher institutions have diversely responded to globalisation effects, with many embracing and aligning internalization in higher education as a response to the global trend (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). According to Knight (2008), internationalisation is the process of incorporating a global, international, or intercultural perspective into the goals, duties, and modes of delivery of post-secondary education. Subsequently, the term evolved into the 'intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education to improve the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to

society.’ (Hans et al.,2015, p44) The implications of internationalisation in higher education extend to sustaining and broadening research and scholarship through active academic contact and improving social and economic potential. (Jibeen & Khan, 2015)

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has set a goal to become a premier regional educational hub by 2020. To realize the goal, internationalisation has been incorporated higher education as one of the key objectives of the Malaysian National Strategic Plan of Higher Education (PSPTN) Phase 1 (2007-2010), as outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education (undated, 2007). The policy has been revised and refined to become an international educational hub by launching the new policy document, the Malaysia Education Blueprint – Higher Education 2015–2025 (MEBHE 2015–2025) (MOE, 2015, p. 8-4).

During the initial phase (2007-2010) of the Malaysian National Strategic Plan of Higher Education (Pelan, Strategik Pengajian, Tinggi, Negara, or PSPTN), the Malaysian government highlighted that the internationalisation of higher education was imperative. The primary goal was twofold: to improve the quality of education and at the same time bolster Malaysian graduates’ level of competitiveness in the global job market. Similarly, the commitment to the internalization of higher education was reiterated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint-High Education 2015-2025.

One of the notable undertakings within the realm of internalization is the increasing focus on integrating higher education graduates into their future workplaces through community service programmes at the international level. Community service programmes have served as platforms for the application of academic knowledge, practical skills acquisition, and diverse community engagements worldwide among graduates. However, this is not without controversies as graduates may encounter several obstacles in carrying out international community service, particularly in acquiring and applying the necessary professional life skills and competencies essential for effective international community service initiatives. Therefore, this study seeks to explore undergraduates’ perceptions regarding international community service programmes implemented in Malaysian public universities, especially applying professional life skills, and to get high-institution educators’ views on how to navigate these challenges. The study hopes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of community service projects. The study also provided information from the perspective of academics to help universities and educators improve international community service programmes.

## **Literature Review**

### **International Community Service**

Incorporating international community service programmes into Malaysian higher education will help undergraduates acquire fundamental professional life skills during their university life and at the same time prepare them for global job markets in the era of rapid globalization. Many studies discussed the advantages of implementing international community service programs in higher education. These advantages include helping students to increase their cultural diversity awareness (Deardorff, 2018; Kim, 2018), develop their professional life skills (Moussa & Mehta (2018) and apply academic knowledge in real life (Yorke, 2015; Billett, 2017).

There are numerous challenges and difficulties that Malaysian undergraduates face while realizing their universities' implementation of international community service programmes during their university life. The previous study discovered the challenges and difficulties that undergraduates face include inadequate proper training, insufficient institutional support, and financial constraints (Othman & Ahmad, 2017; Bista & Foster, 2018; Cheong et al., 2018). Besides, Malaysian undergraduates are facing additional challenges such as adapting to the local culture (Lim et al., 2019) and language barriers (Muhammad et al., 2017).

### **Professional Life Skills**

The rapid advancement of science, technology, and globalization has necessitated a paradigm shift in education. In this contemporary and globalized world, individuals have no choice but to navigate society with heightened responsibilities. Success is determined by not only specialized knowledge earned but of equal importance, by an individual's robust professional soft skills. Soft skills have become a fundamental requirement in today's labour market and are universal requirements of today's education (Yurii. et al.,2022). Many studies (Cheong et al., 2016; Hairi et al., 2011; Teng et al., 2019) underscore the pivotal role of soft skills in adequately preparing graduates for the job market and increasing their employability or ability to be self-employed. In addition, Basir et al (2022) postulate that positive values, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities rank among the most important soft skills contributing to employability among Malaysian graduates. Meanwhile, though creative and critical thinking, analytical skills, general knowledge, and communication skills hold importance, their impact on employability appears relatively less significant. Interestingly, these soft skills acquisition are not confined to classroom settings. Working experience gained through an internship (Basir et al., 2022) or from the International Community Service (ICS) programmes proves instrumental. This is because these programmes require students to have good communication, leadership, collaboration, teamwork, and time management skills to run the programmes smoothly.

The requisites for life skills in the Malaysian job market pivot according to industry needs. Nevertheless, findings from The Malaysian Employer Needs and Satisfaction Survey 2017 uncovered that communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability are among the most important life skills required in the Malaysian job market. Creativity, emotional intelligence, and leadership on the other hand are a discernible trend of importance as the job market evolves.

In many Malaysian universities, community service programmes focus on knowledge sharing and information transfer between undergraduates and local communities at the international level. Due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus worldwide and the movement control order issued in Malaysia on 18 March 2020. however, the programmes were halted to empower communities for a better life transformation.

Existing research has extensively explored various facts of internationalisation in Malaysian higher education, encompassing its benefits and challenges, the role of international students, the international curriculum, and the impact of community service on students. However, a gap exists in a specific lack of research focusing on international community service in higher education in Malaysia, as community service can provide

students with valuable opportunities to engage with diverse communities and develop cross-cultural competencies. Furthermore, international community service can foster global citizenship and help students prepare for the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world.

Thus, this paper seeks to address the gap by investigating the challenges encountered by Malaysian undergraduates and examines the challenges faced by Malaysian undergraduates in the implementation of internationalization via the ICS programmes from an academic perspective.

*The study aims to answer the following research questions*

1. What are the primary challenges faced by undergraduates in applying professional life skills in international community service within higher education?
2. Which professional life skills do undergraduates lack when implementing international community service programmes?

### **Research Methodology**

The study aimed to identify undergraduates' difficulties and challenges when organising the international Community Service (ICS) programme from the academics' perspective. It also aims to discover the lack of professional life skills in participating in ICS programmes among undergraduates at public universities in Malaysia.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured research. It consisted of open-ended interview questions that allowed undergraduate participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words to gather in-depth information on opinions and perceptions. Four academics from different Malaysian public universities with experience participating in the ICS programme organised by higher institutions in Malaysia from 2016 to 2019 were interviewed. Those academics who possess significant experience in coordinating and supervising international community service programs within the higher education context. These academics were chosen solely because of their experience as ICS programs liaison officers or advisors and their knowledge of the challenges, including skill gaps undergraduate participants face during international community service.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the major data-gathering strategy. Individual interviews with each academic were conducted to collect rich and comprehensive narratives on their opinions on the problems and skills inadequacies identified among undergraduate participants in the ICS programmes. Interview questions were created to meet the study's research topics and themes. The interview questions focused on the perception of professional life skills instructors require to organise the ICS programme, the skills undergraduates lack, and suggestions to improve undergraduate skills. Each interview took about an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the undergraduate participants, transcribed and analysed to answer the research questions. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns in the data. (Duranti, 2006).

To analyse the qualitative data collected from the interview, the researchers utilized the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. After collecting the interview data, the

researchers studied the interview scripts first. To obtain more information on the participants' thoughts and opinions, the researchers read and reread the scripts carefully several times. Next, the researchers used deductive and inductive codes to encode interview transcripts. The themes were created by grouping codes according to the relevancy and patterns in interview data. Finally, the researcher recognised patterns and connections among these topics. The entire procedure helped researchers gain valuable insights into obstacles and shortcomings encountered by university undergraduates participating in the ICS programme.

Ethical considerations such as obtaining informed consent from participants, and maintaining confidentiality of collected data were also taken into account.

### Findings

To analyze qualitative data, the researchers used an inductive encoding process (Creswell,2017) using ATLAS.ti and thematic analysis (Braun& Clarke,2019). The researchers begin by reviewing the data collected from each interview and compare and contrast code, topic and category throughout the session. The researcher evaluated each interview transcript, looking for words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs that related to the subject to uncover significant data related to the study-specific area of interest, such as lack of life skills. Finally, the researcher then chose and extracted the essential data before coding it.

At first, the researcher coded using participants' exact words or phrases or the researcher's summary of their ideas, listing all codes in the margin. The researcher did not code every sentence to prevent the coding process from becoming overwhelming, as recommended by Creswell (2017). The researcher combined similar codes, removed redundant or overlapping codes, and arrived at a manageable number of codes. The main categories identified by the researcher were then broken down into several subcategories. After obtaining the categories and subcategories for each group (as shown in Table 1), the researcher reviewed and consolidated them with those of other group discussions. The final codes thus obtained helped to address the research questions.

Table 1

#### *Coding Example*

Lack of life skills	
Communication barriers	Facing challenges in effectively communicating with the local community due to language barriers and a lack of intercultural communication skills.
Time management issues	Expressed struggling with time management, citing difficulties in juggling multiple responsibilities, coursework, preparation, and part-time jobs, which often led to feeling overwhelmed and stressed, lacking English language competencies, and having difficulty communicating with the local community.
Team collaboration	Participants struggled with teamwork and collaboration during community service projects, many conflicting

	ideas, and inadequate communication among team members.
Critical Thinking	Participants expressed frustration with the lack of critical thinking skills among the participants in the community service program, not creative rather than repeat doing things from their seniors.

**1. Challenges faced by undergraduates when implementing professional life skills in the International Community Service (ICS) programme**

Based on their experience and perception, (ICS) programme undergraduate participants expressed some of the challenges that they faced when applying professional life skills in international community service, as illustrated in Figure 1:

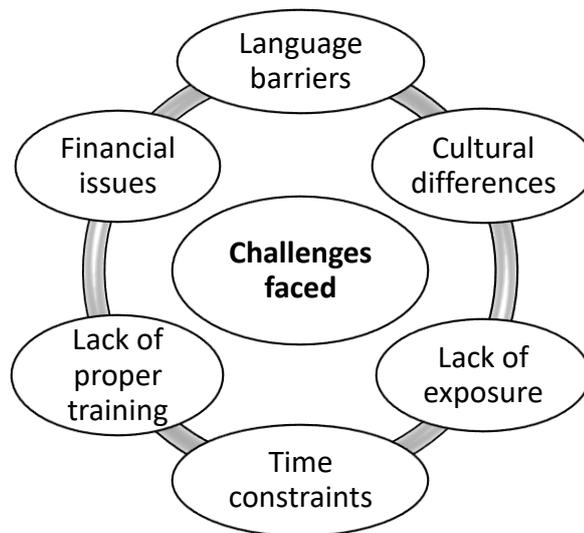


Figure 1: Challenges faced by International Community Service (ICS) participants

**1) Language Barriers**

Language barriers can be difficult to overcome in ICS programmes, especially for undergraduates who are not fluent in the local language of the host country. Malaysian undergraduates participating in the ICS programme may encounter several language barriers when working with international communities that speak various languages. Typically, Malaysian undergraduates who are participating in ICS programs can only use English to communicate with the local community. Although English is the second language in Malaysia, participants in the ICS programmes are not fluent in English. Consequently, it is difficult for them to interact with the local community as one of the ICS programme academics mentioned in the interview:

*Participants A*

Communication is probably the most challenging for students, as they have to communicate with people internationally. Language can be one major problem, and though the students know English, using it in real situations is difficult. Dealing with diplomats at embassies, NGOs, universities and basically with people who don't know Bahasa Malaysia is a real challenge.

Another participant also expressed a similar perception

*Participant B*

.....language problems as most Japanese don't speak English.... Students know some basic Japanese because they learn that in university and also try to learn basic phrases before they fly, but it is not enough.

## **2) Cultural differences**

Cultural differences are another barrier for participants participating in ICS programmes abroad. It significantly impacts community service abroad, as they may encounter social norms, values, and practices different from their own.

Cultural sensitivity is one of the soft skills that the students developed through the community service program. Many studies (Sari et al., 2019; Llenares & Deocarís, 2019) discovered that understanding cultural differences could make participants feel comfortable and engaged in the programme. Llenares and Deocarís(2019) argued that cultural beliefs and values influence attitudes toward volunteering, and cultural differences in communication styles may affect students' development of communication skills through community service.

Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications. The miscommunications and misunderstandings between two parties from different cultural backgrounds can affect the effectiveness of any international community service as mentioned in the interview session by one of the instructors:

*Participant C*

To know and to respect others is very important. We know that this is very difficult for us. As we are all aware Malaysians tend to be late for everything, but compared to the Japanese they are very punctual!

## **3) Limited Exposure to Diverse Culture**

One of the difficulties faced by undergraduates in the ICS programmes was the lack of cultural exposure. Undergraduate participants faced difficulties in interacting effectively with local communities from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. The participants did not know the different languages, beliefs, norms and values of the local people, leading to many misunderstandings, misunderstandings, and lack of cultural sensitivity and appreciation. This finding matches previous research (King et al., 2013) that studied Canadian university students participating in overseas community service programs and found that participants could not establish significant ties with local communities due to a lack of knowledge of the country's culture, language and history.

According to one of the academics, as stated in an interview

*Participant A*

There was a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding among our students and the local community they serve. Our student has very limited knowledge of other cultures, they did not explore much before they went to serve the community service program, and it is very difficult for them to collaborate with the local community to run the programme smoothly.

#### 4) Time constraints

Time constraints challenge undergraduates to organise the ICS programme. Balancing academic commitments with community service can be challenging for them as they have to balance their studies, and university co-curricular activities whilst working on ICS preparations.

This is evidenced as one of the academics remarked

*Participant A*

Time constraints are one of the significant challenges facing our students in balancing their academic workload with the organisation of the community service programme. That required substantial amounts of time and effort. Some of our students are working part-time to support their families simultaneously.....

*Participant B*

..... *Our* students cannot commit themselves to preparing the programme as they need to handle their studies, a part-time job, and meeting up with their group discussions. It is very challenging for them.....

#### 5) Financial Problems

Financial problems are a significant challenge for undergraduate ICS participants in organising community service abroad. They must save for six semesters and engage in fundraising and entrepreneurial activities to generate the necessary funds. Some universities such as University Science Islam Malaysia (USIM) supported only 10% of the fees needed for the community service programme, leading undergraduates to raise the remaining funds through entrepreneurial activities or donation drives.

One of the academics mentioned in the interview

*Participants A*

...most of the students come from the B40 (low-income) group. They do not have extra money to save every semester. It is not easy for them to raise funds through entrepreneurial activities. They have no skills to do it. Some students need to borrow money from others to participate in the programme. Financial problems are very challenging for them.....

*Participant C*

The financial problem is one of the challenges students face in the programme. It needs a lot of money. Students need to raise funds to run the program, which requires a lot of effort and is time-consuming. So, money is one of their most important challenges because going abroad, especially to Japan, requires a huge sum of money for travel, accommodation and many more.....

#### 6) Insufficient Practical Training

Programme academics expressed that the university provides participants with inadequate practical training before going overseas for community service. Sufficient practical training is crucial for undergraduates who participate in community service programmes overseas. This is because cultural differences can impact the effectiveness of

community services, sufficient practical training can help undergraduates understand cultural diversity and prepare them to work effectively with diverse cultural backgrounds. Sufficient practical training can also help the undergraduates understand their needs and tailor their service to meet those needs effectively. Without sufficient practical training, it will lead to ineffective service delivery and limited impact on the community. As mentioned in the interview session by one of the academics:

*Participant c*

The university did not provide sufficient training for our students to participate in community service. Our students, without training, are not aware of diverse cultures, and poor communication leads to many misunderstandings, conflicts, and confusion.

In conclusion, the responses from all the academic participants highlighted several significant challenges encountered by undergraduates when applying professional skills in engaging in international community service programs organized by Malaysian high institutions. These challenges are language barriers, cultural differences, limits of exposure to diverse cultures, time constraints, financial problems and insufficient practical training. These obstacles highlight the multidimensional nature of applying professional life skills within the international community service programme, showing areas where focused interventions might improve undergraduate participants' performance in international community service. Addressing these issues will result in more meaningful participation, effective cross-cultural communication, and improved development of soft skills among participants.

## **2. What professional life skills do participants lack in international community service?**

### **1) Communication Skills**

When communicating with local communities, undergraduates in the ICS programme can encounter language barriers, which can impede their ability to develop professional life skills such as communication, negotiation, and leadership.

As one of the participants mentioned in the interview

*Participant A*

When our students communicate with local communities in developing countries where they do not speak English, their ability to develop professional life skills can be hampered. These skills include communication, negotiation, and leadership, as effective communication is essential to build relationships with community members.

Another academic participant also expressed that

*Participant C*

Lack of confidence and language proficiency. Communicating with people of different backgrounds can give them more challenges if they lack cultural understanding. Knowing foreign languages is key. Not all people speak English.

The finding supported many other previous studies (Wells et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2018; Suhaila et al., 2020; Park, 2021) that language barriers are the primary challenges faced when implementing international community service programs. Wells et al (2018) examined the students who participated in a service-learning programme in Latin America. The study found that language barriers hampered the ability to communicate effectively with members of the local community and their ability to develop intercultural competence. Park (2021) conducted a study on an international service-learning programme in South Korea and found that language barriers are the main challenge that prevents effective communication between student volunteers and local community members.

## **2) Time Management**

Effective time management can help undergraduates balance their academic responsibilities with their personal lives, leading to a more fulfilling and well-rounded experience. Poor time management skills negatively impact quality of life. (Wang et al., 2011) Many previous studies (Adams & Blair, 2019; Majid et al., 2020) discovered a correlation between time management skills and academic and job performance. Adams and Blair (2019) investigated the relationship between time management behaviour and academic performance among undergraduates. The study found that undergraduates who reported effective time management behaviours had better academic performance than those who reported poor time management behaviours. Abd Majid et al (2020) found that time management is the second-highest factor influencing the employability of first-degree graduates. Undergraduates with good time management in higher education tend to be more successful. Nevertheless, many undergraduates lack good time management skills when organising and running the community service programme overseas. As one of the academic participants mentioned in the interview:

### *Participants B*

Our students do not have good time management habits and are unaware of how important time management is. They are not able to plan the task and allocate sufficient time for the task given to ensure the given task can be completed on time.

## **3) Team Collaboration**

Teamwork skills are essential for students in both academic and professional settings. It allows students to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and achieve common goals (Sulaiman et al., 2017; De Prada et al., 2022). Undergraduates participating in ICS programmes also lack team collaboration. This finding supports previous studies (Sulaiman et al., 2017; De Prada et al., 2022) in which many students struggle with teamwork skills. Studies (Lozano-Rodriguez et al., 2020; De Prada et al., 2022) found a positive correlation between teamwork skills and students' academic performance. One of the academics mentioned in the interview:

### *Participant A*

..... Our students lack team collaboration due to differing personalities, lack of proper communication, and insufficient teamwork skills....

### *Participant B*

.... Students lack teamwork skills. They cannot work as a team. There is a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding going on throughout the programme.

Students should realise that team collaboration is a crucial factor that influences the effectiveness of community service.....

In conclusion, the study identifies the unique professional life skills that undergraduates lack in international community service through the international community service programme. The insights gained from the experiences of the academic participants reveal crucial skill deficiencies. Communication skills, time management, and team collaboration skills. These skill gaps highlight the importance of focused interventions and skill development activities that address language obstacles, improve time management skills, and promote successful teamwork. By addressing these skill deficits, undergraduate participants can improve their overall involvement, partake more effectively in international community service, and build the critical competencies required for success in academic and professional endeavours.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study focuses on the challenges related to the application of professional life skills among undergraduates engaged in the internalisation of community service programs within higher education in Malaysia. Notably, these insights are derived from the perspectives of higher education academics rather than undergraduates' perspectives or actual proficiencies. Nevertheless, these data offer valuable insights into the challenges associated with internalizing professional life skills in community service among undergraduates in Malaysian higher education settings.

The finding suggests various difficulties encountered by undergraduate students participating in community service programmes. These obstacles include language barriers, limited exposure, financial constraints, time limitations, inadequate training, and cultural barriers. Among the identified professional skills lacking among undergraduates are communication, teamwork, and time management. This finding suggests future research should concentrate on assessing the undergraduate's skills competence, rather than perceived abilities. This is in line with the Malaysian government's aspiration as Mohd Basir et al (2022) mentioned that one of the Malaysian government's initiatives in the training scheme programme is to ensure that undergraduates can upgrade their skills during their degree time. To facilitate the smooth integration of higher education graduates into the job market, higher institutions should regularly review the programme and align programs with the dynamic industry demands.

From the educators' perspective, addressing these challenges requires a multipronged approach. Some possible strategies include providing language and cultural training, exposing students to diverse experiences, encouraging collaboration and teamwork, providing adequate resources, and providing guidance and support throughout the community service project. It is also essential to recognise and value the contributions of Malaysian undergraduates to international community service programmes while also providing opportunities for them to learn and grow professionally. The study suggests that university management should organise training courses or domestic community service programs starting from the first year to help students gain some experience and improve professional life skills. Furthermore, collaboration between higher education institutions and industry partners is proposed to increase undergraduates' awareness of the importance of

professional soft skills. Empowering undergraduate students to take ownership of their skills development, adapt to evolving and demanding job market demands, and bolster their employability remains pivotal.

The current study contributes to the existing theoretical and contextual knowledge of undergraduates' professional skills within the scope of the international community service programme. The study findings highlight the important correlation between professional life skills and employability, and its importance in preparing undergraduates for success in a globalized society. The findings of the study may serve as a resource for educators, and higher education administration looking to improve the educational system to ensure that undergraduates are equipped with the required professional skills.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study on the challenges undergraduate participants face in applying professional life skills in international community service programmes in higher education has limitations that must be acknowledged. One of the main limitations of the study is its small sample size. The study was conducted with only four academics, so the findings may not be generalisable to the entire population or applicable to other contexts or situations. Additionally, the study aimed at Malaysian undergraduates participating in higher education international community service programmes, and could not be applied to other community service programs or university undergraduates from different geographical, and cultural backgrounds.

Since the study uses a qualitative research methodology that relies on data interpretations, statistical generalization is limited. Therefore, it is highly recommended that future studies be done using a mixed-method or quantitative approach to obtain more data at a much larger scale. Future research perhaps can compare the outcome of control groups and uncontrolled groups to ascertain if all the challenges obtained from this study may arise due to certain factors. Despite these limitations, the findings of the study provide valuable insights worth investigating and suggest that universities should incorporate life skills into course curricula and provide further training to undergraduates to improve their professional life skills.

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