

The Perception of Volunteerism in Cultivating Soft Skills in University Students

Muhammad Danish Bin Mohd Johari

Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation

muhammad.danish@apu.edu.my

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the role of volunteerism in fostering soft skill development among university students, focusing on a program at Asia Pacific University (APU) in early 2024. Through ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews, the study addresses four research questions concerning perceptions of soft skill acquisition among teachers and students. Literature review findings indicate a growing demand for graduates with diverse soft skills, which are often overlooked in traditional academic programs. Volunteerism, however, offers a practical avenue for students to cultivate skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership. Guided by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), the study explores how students learn through concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Data collection involved interviewing participants using convenience sampling. Findings reveal that volunteerism facilitated the development of essential soft skills among students, including communication, problem-solving, and empathy. Despite limitations, the study concluded that volunteerism offers a valuable platform for soft skill development, particularly when integrated into university curricula, and underscores the transformative potential of volunteerism in nurturing well-rounded graduates equipped with essential soft skills for the future workforce.

Key Words: *Volunteerism, Soft Skills, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), El-Shaddai Refugee Centre*

1.0 Introduction

This study delves into the perceptions of soft skill building in university students. Beginning January to March 2024, 18 undergraduates from Asia Pacific University (APU) took part in a volunteer programme to teach refugee students from the El-Shaddai Serdang refugee centre. This was part of a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative by the School of Foundation at APU. Each month, APU undergraduates will be sent to one of three refugee centres to teach or take part in activities with the refugee students. Through this initiative, student volunteers took on an active role in guiding others. This has allowed them to build soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and leadership – key for their future careers. As the demand for more graduates to exhibit a diverse set of soft skills increases, there is a growing need to explore the importance of building soft skills in undergraduates.

1.1 Problem Statement

Soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving, play a crucial role in the success of individuals in both their personal and professional lives. The acquisition of soft skills will always be regarded as important by any institution although many universities prioritize the acquisition of technical knowledge and hard skills that are directly related to a specific field of study or profession (Lozovoy et al., 2019). This emphasis on technical expertise and theoretical knowledge often takes precedence over the development of soft skills. Traditional academic programs often focus on technical knowledge and theoretical concepts, leaving little room for the development of soft skills. While volunteerism can act as a catalyst to build soft skills, there isn't a proper assessment in the curriculum (Wang et al., 2020). Instead, incorporating volunteerism into the curriculum can provide students with real-world experiences that allow them to practice and develop these skills in a meaningful way.

By engaging in volunteer work, students have the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world contexts, interacting with diverse groups of people and facing various challenges. In China, the Chinese Young Volunteers Association trains Chinese undergraduates in volunteerism to bring about higher-skilled workers (Xu, 2020). Additionally, engaging in volunteer activities can lead to personal growth and development as it provides opportunities to learn new skills, gain valuable experience, and enhance one's sense of empathy and social responsibility (Chen, Chen, & Xu, 2022). Through their volunteer experiences, undergraduates can develop instrumental skills related to their specific field of study, as well as interpersonal skills that are valuable in any profession.

Most importantly, this study highlights a problem that a university like APU should work towards addressing which is to bridge the qualification gap in its graduates. Higher education institutions (HEI) face challenges in preparing students to meet the skills requirement of the industry (Okolie et al, 2020). Lecturers need to be more dynamic in their teaching approaches with a curriculum that isn't solely based on learning theories (Okolie et al, 2020). Without a doubt, volunteerism would complement what students aren't able to learn in books (Chen et al, 2023). The findings of this study will reveal how APU students are in support of volunteerism and therefore, this highlights the need to study the potential of volunteerism in developing future programmes for APU.

1.2 Objective of The Study and Research Questions

The present study aims to address this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of the impact of volunteerism on university students. Specifically, this study answers the following questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the role of volunteerism in fostering soft skills development among university students?
2. What soft skills do teachers believe are most effectively cultivated through volunteer experiences?
3. How do students perceive the transferability of soft skills acquired through volunteerism to real-world situations and professional settings?
4. How do students overcome challenges encountered in the process of developing soft skills through volunteer activities?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Soft Skills and Volunteerism

The need for fresh graduates and employees alike to have a mastery of soft skills is ever on the rise with soft skills such as communication, critical thinking skills, customer service, emotional intelligence, and project management being one of the many sought-after skills by employers. These skills complete a graduate to be the ideal professional for industry as it transforms them from the unprepared student to the disciplined, determined, resilient, and positive-minded trained worker (Pellerey, 2023; Poláková et al., 2023; Tyschenko, 2023). Just as it is important for a student, soft skills enhance a lecturer's capability and is an area for appraisal (Tang, 2020). Therefore, soft skills are instrumental in increasing the overall employability of a fresh graduate and help boost competency in the current workforce. Although there is the argument that HEIs may not be doing enough to prepare students with the actual skills needed for the labour force (Noah & Aziz, 2020; Warner, 2021).

Volunteerism plays a pivotal role in cultivating these skills in students. According to Allowaish's (2022) study on volunteerism, transferable skills like communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving alongside networking, practical experience, and personal growth are seen in volunteers. Giancaspro and Manuti (2021) suggested that developing a strategic plan for the socialization of newcomers and training of volunteers could help manage human resources effectively and enhance performance quality. Participants in the study perceived voluntary work as a valuable opportunity to develop skills and abilities transferable to the labour market and highlighted the significance of informal and non-formal workplace learning in enhancing their employability through volunteering experiences. Volunteerism is not only a way to give back to the community but also a powerful tool for personal and professional development. By actively engaging in volunteer activities, individuals can enhance their skills, expand their networks, and pave the way for future career success (Cívico-Ariza et al., 2020).

2.2 Generation Z

Discussions on students' soft skills should also factor in the current generation that is in question. At present, Generation Z, or Gen-Z have begun tertiary education and will be the next workforce. According to a survey of students by Magano et al. (2020), it was found that Gen-Z had characteristics that made them ideal for project management skills such as being optimistic, resilient, and result-oriented, but this study also highlighted their lack of emotional control. Preparing them to be the next generation of the workforce will be this new challenge for lecturers today. This generation values career success as subjective rather than just focusing on monetary gain (Mahesh et al., 2021). They are described as "dynamic, transparent, creative, innovative, involved, tolerant, socially responsible, emotional, knowledgeable and individualistic" (Racolța-Paina & Irini, 2021). Thus, HEIs need to deliver a curriculum that can motivate students to achieve career success but also to be innovative in delivering lessons and giving them the freedom to choose how they wish to learn (Mahesh et al., 2021).

2.3 Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Experiential Learning Theory or ELT was first developed by David A. Kolb in the 1970s that describes how people learn through their experiences (*What Is Experiential Learning?* - Institute for Experiential Learning, 2023). According to Kolb (2005), it is a process that goes

through 4 steps of learning: concrete experience (experiencing), reflective observation (reflecting), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (acting).

Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle



Kolb based ELT on the theories of prominent psychologists such as John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers, and others. ELT is defined as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (Kolb, 2005).

The four steps of learning as developed by Kolb (2005) are briefly explained below:

Experiencing (Concrete Experience): Learning begins when a learner uses senses and perceptions to engage in what is happening now. Reflecting (Reflective Observation): After the experience, a learner reflects on what happened and connects feelings with ideas about the experience. Thinking (Abstract Conceptualization): The learner engages in thinking to reach conclusions and form theories, concepts, or general principles that can be tested. Acting (Active Experimentation): The learner tests the theory and applies what was learned to get feedback and create the next experience. (*What Is Experiential Learning? - Institute for Experiential Learning, 2023*)

Learning does not end with acting as the experiences gained from the first cycle feed into a new ELT cycle that builds new learning experiences. This makes ELT the ideal theory to describe volunteerism in students as our students were actively engaged with the activities and through interviews with them, they reflected on their gained experiences by drawing out connections between the experiences gained with their prior experiences and knowledge on soft skills.

3.0 Methodology

This qualitative study is by ethnographic design as it draws results from observational data and participants’ reflections via interviews ‘to document and interpret human behaviour and social

phenomenon within the cultural context' of volunteerism by university students (Creswell, 2012). Convenience sampling was used to interview the research participants. These were 5 student volunteers from the APU Foundation programme and 2 El-Shaddai staff members. Only 5 out of the 18 students were available as 8 students were unable to continue with the volunteering programme due to personal reasons and there was a time constraint to meet with the remaining students. The director and 1 teacher from the El-Shaddai Refugee Centre were also interviewed as they had worked closely with the student volunteers by training them to be facilitators and teachers for the refugee students. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview at their convenience. Observational notes were also taken to document how the volunteers managed themselves and engaged with the refugees in class.

4.0 Findings

Throughout the three months, the group of volunteers from APU was sent to two different refugee centres under the same organisation – El-Shaddai. The group, originally consisting of 18 members, visited their first centre with minimal guidance from their lecturers and their activities had been planned out for them. Their role was to teach the refugee students who were mostly teenagers, simple English lessons. Initial observations found the group had a try-and-see-what-happens attitude for their first visit. The volunteers were enthusiastic to participate but were uncoordinated once they entered the refugee centre. They knew the activities they wanted to carry out but were unable to adapt well to slight changes in the classroom. At the same time, there was hesitation to actively engage with the refugee students. Lecturers were there to oversee and provide some guidance to the volunteers but remained mostly as observers. The volunteers eventually delivered their lessons and achieved their objectives.

In their second month, the same group of APU volunteers was sent to a different refugee centre to conduct their activities. They were briefed by the El-Shaddai director that the students at this refugee centre had lower English proficiency scores than those they taught at the first centre. Unlike their first visit, they were given once-a-week training by the director and a teacher from El-Shaddai on communication and classroom management. This practical training was found to be important for the volunteers as comments from the El-Shaddai teachers stated that the volunteers were more focused, driven, and coordinated than from their first visit. They improved this level of coordination and engagement in their third month when they visited the first centre in their first month. Although fewer volunteers remained by the third month and those who remained were awarded certificates from El-Shaddai and APU.

Five volunteers were interviewed to get their perspectives on the impact of volunteerism in building soft skills.

1. How do you perceive the transferability of soft skills acquired through volunteerism to real-world situations and professional settings?
 - a. ... *I had to adapt to my surroundings and how I communicate when I'm in a new environment.*
 - b. ... *good improve my presentation skills like because like the kids that we got were like younger kids I have to have prepare myself how I want to present*
 - c. ... *I learned that communication skills is required for me because you need to communicate with the refugee students.*
 - d. ... *maybe time management because you have the limited time so we need to control each activities ...*

- e. *Participating in volunteering events means that you interact with different people who experience who has experience in varied situations ...*
 - f. *It's taught me to be more open-minded to other people like I'm more of like a closed person, so it's made me to be more active to people like to be more talkative to other people. It made me develop my communication skills to other people.*
2. Can you share specific instances where you have applied soft skills gained from volunteer activities in other aspects of your life?
- a. *... I can speak better with my classmates in classes, especially during presentations I'm not that shy anymore...*
 - b. *So for example, in volunteering, I showed them a picture of ... I told them frog but they didn't know what is frog. So, I showed them a picture so they like ohh yeah this is frog. So in that way I got it like ohh so to my friends I can show them an example first so that they will get the idea. So that's how I applied it.*
 - c. *So maybe in future or I go to internship or even find a job, I also need to communicate with my maybe with my colleagues or with my leader ...*
 - d. *I understand that they also have personalities, interests and the fact that there are kids and they experienced some troubles and bad situations in their life doesn't make them any different from us and begun to understand empathy and being more confident with people ...*
 - e. *We had a group presentation. So previously when we went to volunteer the second time, It made me realize that I have to be more active towards the people. So it made me realize that I should speak to other people. So when we had a group presentation I rarely talk because I get I get stage fright. So it made me decreased my stage fright a little bit. It made me feel a little bit confident where I can speak my mind and I don't have to like stop.*
3. In the process of developing soft skills through volunteer activities, what challenges have you encountered, and how did you overcome them?
- a. *I have a fear of saying something wrong and I'm shy. So, it was hard to be ... it was hard to lead them in the beginning. I was scared that I would say something wrong or I don't have anything to say. So, then I realize that ohh actually I'll just say anything that makes sense to bring up the mood in the classroom.*
 - b. *I think not being able to talk to people like to a bigger crowd so I feel like if I practice more and like the more I talk to bigger crowds like presentation in class and all so I feel like that way I can get better.*
 - c. *The problems is because not everyone active and not everyone interesting on your activities so you need to have another way. Another way to let them have their own interests and have fun together. Something like because when the game that we play or we plan to play maybe not everyone knows and even heard the name, the name of the game. So the explanation is very important and you need to maybe have demonstration to them first. So you need to think first and not because every challenge that you face maybe will be the new challenge to you. So you need to think and try to imagine before you go to organize activity. Maybe in future you need to have the plan first. [problem-solving]*
 - d. *One of the challenges experienced while interacting with kids is the language barrier. Maybe their knowledge is less than mine or maybe they don't understand my accent or something like. When we went to a first place for volunteering, these kids knowledge in English were impressive. ... then we went to the second place these kids who were in our group. They were much smaller and they sometimes didn't understand my assignments to them. But I still could message non-verbally, gestures and they*

understood me pretty well even if they didn't understand my language. I found a way to interact with them. [problem-solving]

- e. *The challenge I encountered was through communication [language barrier]. They didn't speak English very well they were mostly in Malay so for me to be able to talk to them was really hard but so I just came up with the using the gestures like hand gestures or maybe like showing them some pictures or I can ask one of my classmates to maybe translate them into me. The other challenge we faced was for them to come in front to talk. We played an activities so for them to be able to come that was another challenge should we improvised during that time. We had to push them like 'you can do it!' to come to the front. [empathy]*

The following questions were asked as a follow-up question during the interview with the volunteers.

1. Can you provide examples of situations where you faced difficulties in developing certain soft skills during volunteerism, and how you addressed those challenges?
 - a. *In my personal opinion and ever since seeing there especially living conditions, I learned that I just feel like volunteering more now and I realized that I should be more grateful for what I have and I want to give out to the community and hopefully in the future I can have more chances to see that to help people like them. [character development]*
 - b. *I think not being able to talk to people like to a bigger crowd so I feel like if I practice more and like the more I talk to bigger crowds like presentation in class and all so I feel like that way I can get better.*
2. How did you feel about that being successfully able to communicate with them?
 - a. *After that I was happy that there were no misunderstanding between us and not without the help of my members because they also help them and group work is really important in the situation.*
3. Do you think universities should encourage more volunteerism in all their students?
 - a. *Yes, I think they should because like from my perspective it helped me gain confidence it helped me to see another side of the world that I didn't know. It will help other students to be more confident to be more open minded and it can also develop like as a teamwork to other people. [character development]*

Overall, the volunteers mostly developed communication skills and skills related to it. They also perceived that the experience gained has made them more confident to take on various communication roles alongside other soft skills that have helped with their personal development.

A teacher from El-Shaddai who observed and helped in training the volunteers gave her perception on the volunteers' growth and soft skill development.

1. Can you describe your perception of the role of volunteerism in fostering soft skills development among university students?
 - a. *I would describe this as a valuable benefit to the students because volunteerism gives opportunities for leadership, for communications especially communications with different levels of society and it benefits them in a sense of interaction with the different layers of society as mentioned and the confidence to lead provides them the opportunity to influence...*

2. How do you believe volunteer experiences contribute to the overall personal and professional growth of students?
 - a. *There was passion in them the second time. You can see Chloe, Tancent, maybe they rose to the occasion. Maybe they were more confident the second time. Yes it could be a level of preparation but I think through the level of preparation they also vested their time in actually preparing and when they went there they actually took the lead and make sure that things are ran successfully. ... Some have to be prodded. Most of them who participated in this program I can see that they really put themselves forward [character development].*
3. From your perspective, what soft skills do you think are most effectively cultivated through volunteer experiences, and why?
 - a. *I think empathy is the most cultivated and that's very key if you want to be the leader. ... So being a volunteer if you are able to cultivate empathy because firstly and it's much easier in a sense because it's a different level of society because you are helping the refugee ... but it's basically they need a little bit more help right and it's very obvious so if you're able to empathize with them help them it's just used to kind of like think for others ...*
4. Can you provide specific examples of how you have observed students developing these soft skills through volunteer activities?
 - a. *There was a child a refugee child she fell down. Straightaway, the students just ran to her [handling crisis]. Asked her if she is ok. The group took care of her and asked her if she is ok and just continued with the game. The fact that they were willing to simplify their games to the students' level [adaptability]. The point was the second time they were willing to go to that level to connect with them [empathy].*

The teacher from El-Shaddai stressed on empathy being cultivated through volunteerism as leads to better leadership. On the other hand, the director of El-Shaddai provides his views below.

1. Can you describe your perception of the role of volunteerism in fostering soft skills development among university students?
 - a. *I see voluntarism is a platform for them to use different soft skill to engage with students or with the community. So soft skill like how to present, to communicate, talk to people, to bring the message across, to work together and even team spirit among the volunteers. These are some of the soft skill I think are very important and even sometimes they have conflict. So how to overcome the conflict [problem-solving].*
2. How do you believe volunteer experiences contribute to the overall personal and professional growth of students?
 - a. *They usually prepare. They prepare not only as a person but as a group so that preparation help them to know what to speak, the time control, the content, how to say it, the how to get people attention. So all this if you put it in a proper preparations that will actually help them to present well. [character development]*
3. From your perspective, what soft skills do you think are most effectively cultivated through volunteer experiences, and why?
 - a. *Most common soft skill is communication. They need to communicate with the community. The other soft skill is team spirit because they work as a team and another soft skill is self-confidence because they face group of people when they do*

volunteering work. They face new people new community so they need to have their confidence with whatever they do presentations or do the activity or talk: that confidence. Sometimes they need they need this environment to build the confidence. If not, they will be with their friends, their classmates all this while. They seem to be able to do things but when they stand in front of people, meet new faces, then they start to panic. They get quite nervous. How to deliver across things especially if the community are in a different culture different responses how to confidently brings the message across.

4. Can you provide specific examples of how you have observed students developing these soft skills through volunteer activities?
 - a. *For example the second trip to the Rohingya center so we spent about two three times together in the classroom went through how did and we gave them comments. So that they improve it. So when we went to the place so I found the they are more ready. They gather fast. They gather the student easily interact with them fast and the program runs within the time limits yeah so and the way they play together with the student I see very different as compared to the first time so there's certain part to improve when they going for the second time. So we actually sit down with them details of some of them overlooked. We find that actually helped developed them. [character development]*

The director finds that communication and teamwork are soft skills that any volunteer would cultivate because of volunteerism. He further added that the volunteers' initiative to prepare better is seen as positive character development.

5.0 Discussion

This study set out to explore the impact of volunteerism in cultivating soft skills in university students through the perceptions of teachers and university students. From a teacher's view, past studies have shown that volunteerism provides the experiential learning for students to develop professional competence and ethical responsibility (Llenares & Deocaris, 2019). Therefore, how do teachers perceive the role of volunteerism in fostering soft skills development among university students what soft skills do they believe are most effectively cultivated through volunteer experiences?

This study through interviewing the El-Shaddai teacher and director has found that communication skill, presentation skill, team management, problem-solving, and adaptability are essential skills for cultivating the volunteers' leadership qualities and to empathetic. The real-life experience and preparation the volunteers underwent allowed them to be able to adapt to different situations which were observed in their classroom management skills and when they immediately responded to an incident when a refugee student fell during an activity. As observed, volunteerism had brought out the empathetic side of the students which is essential as an interpersonal skill. The results have positively supported the motion that 'soft skills are important in students' and among the soft skills, communication had been mentioned by both educators and students in this study as essential which further supports past studies on soft skills (Pellerey, 2023; Tyschenko, 2023; Tang 2018).

On the other hand, student volunteers found their experience to be rewarding. Their experiences answered the following research questions: (1) how do students perceive the transferability of soft skills acquired through volunteerism to real-world situations and professional settings and (2) how do students overcome challenges encountered in the process of developing soft skills

through volunteer activities? The student volunteers gave different views on how this practical experience has helped cultivate soft skills, but they have to an extent agree that their volunteerism experience has improved their communication and presentation skills. Indeed, students have a natural affinity for volunteering (Cívico-Ariza et al., 2020).

The volunteers experienced and understood the challenges in dealing with language barriers and took that experience to improve their ability to facilitate the refugee students. Much of their problem-solving ability could be attributed to their need to overcome the language barrier with the refugee students. The language barriers the volunteers faced included explaining instructions and encouraging refugee students to present, group communication among themselves, and facilitating the refugees during classroom activities. The challenges they faced helped them to value communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills as ‘these skills were seen’ (Allowaish, 2022).

5.1 Conclusion and Implication

In conclusion, the different views each volunteer gave during the interview have made it clear that they have become more confident to speak publicly and engage with a larger audience. Their confidence and enthusiasm were observed during their last visit to the refugee centre. This level of confidence isn’t always seen in many undergraduates and is important in building good character as noted by the El-Shaddai director and teacher. While only three months, it has helped the volunteers in their interpersonal skills to be more open-minded to different cultures as one of them has stated.

More importantly, the experience these volunteers gained from teaching and engaging the refugee students has made it clear that soft skills are attainable via volunteerism; specifically teaching via volunteerism. As the teacher from El-Shaddai notes, volunteerism brings out the empathetic side in you. This does bring to attention that educators are vital in developing essential skills. Lecturers need to be trained and supported by their institutions with seminars and workshops with collaborations from the industry (Asbari et al, 2020; Okolie et al, 2020). Soft skills are greatly cultivated when students teach or facilitate as part of their volunteerism. Students would have more to learn when volunteerism is part of the syllabus designed in universities to train undergraduates (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021).

This study also raises the importance of lecturers and educators alike to be able to cultivate and ‘train’ these soft skills in students (Qizi, 2020). The volunteers in this study have demonstrated soft skills in practice. The exposure to an authentic environment over a simulated or mock setting solidifies the need for an ‘education system’ that prepares its students authentically (Asbarai et al, 2020; Tang, 2018). Lecturers need to be more innovative and be given autonomy to be innovative to create enriching learning environments (Putra et al., 2020).

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Due to time constraints by the researcher and the research participants, responses to the interviews were limited to just five respondents from the student volunteers. Future studies on volunteerism should investigate the impact of teaching as part of voluntary work.

5.3 Acknowledgement

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