

Exploring University Students' Level of Commitment Towards Volunteerism

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ABSTRACT

Volunteering has always been seen as a fundamental piece of any society. Its importance stretches from providing services to the needy all the way to enhancing the community's image, culture and even morale, hence its ever-gaining traction in the hearts of university and college students who would be the pioneers of any society's future. Special attention should be given on the involvement of students in volunteerism as they happen to be a very significant population. This study aims at exploring the demographic backgrounds of respondents who participate in volunteering activities and to gauge the level of students volunteering activities by using a sample taken from one of the Public University in Malaysia. A cross sectional study among students in University of Malaya was employed in this study. The analysis of data was based on 375 collected and usable questionnaires. The findings demonstrate a wide-ranging characteristic of the majority of the volunteers among the students in University of Malaya. The study also indicates that most of the volunteers had a moderate level of commitment towards volunteerism. The result finds that majority of respondents 86.4 percent said that they disagreed with the statement "My decision to get involved in volunteering activities is a mistake on my part (negatively worded statement)" (item 10). This item had recorded the highest mean level for the students' commitment towards volunteerism $M (5.96)$, $SD (1.61)$. It seems so crucial for a country to have a high level of volunteerism spirit in the youths. Moreover, it is also foreseen that the substantive results of this study will furnish information to the government and relevant parties, such as non-government organisations (NGOs) in order to devise the strategies to deal with the issue of volunteerism. Finally, it provides new effective instruments at promoting and encouraging volunteerism spirits as well as initiating relevant programmes and situating activities for university students to make it a way of life.

Keywords: Commitment towards Volunteerism, Sociodemographic Profile of Volunteers, University Students, University of Malaya

INTRODUCTION

As Malaysia envisions a progressive and developed country by 2020, many aspects of development especially in terms of empowering its people must be directed by the present government. In that aspect, one of the ways in empowering its people is through volunteerism. These concerns are not without evidence. Volunteering has always been seen as a fundamental piece of any society. Its importance stretches from providing services to the

needy all the way to enhancing the community's image, culture and even morale, hence its ever-gaining traction in the hearts' of university and college students, the pioneers of any society's future. That is to say that volunteering plays a vital role and one strategy to increase the number of volunteers is to identify and target the populations who have the greatest potential for volunteering. One such target population is college or university students (Gage & Thapa, 2012). University students represent one target population with great potential to serve as volunteers.

Given the importance role of volunteerism in our society, the president of Malaysian Youth Council (MYC), Mohamed Maliki Mohamed Rapiee said the culture of volunteerism in the country was still at a moderate stage as there were more followers than the leaders or motivators of voluntary activities (*Bernama*, Jan 17, 2013). Further, in regards to this, MYC Community Service and Rakan Muda Committee secretary, Mohammad Rizan Hassan also affirms that volunteerism in the country should be promoted by making it as a way of life. He puts forward that "We are moving towards achieving the developed status. The success of a country is not measured based on its progress and development, but also in making volunteerism as a way of life " (*Bernama*, Jan 17, 2013). Hence, this scenario worsens the society and those who are in need as they are the disadvantaged groups that require many helps and aids from the volunteering activities.

For example, in the recent flood incidence that happened in the East Coast States of Malaysia, the potential of volunteers among the university students are recognised as they make up the largest group of volunteers camping out in Kelantan to help with aid and relief work in the flood-devastated state (*The Sun Daily*, January 13, 2015). We could imagine what would happen if the numbers of volunteers were inadequate and slow relief response were deployed during the flood incidence. In response to this incidence, more efforts should be mobilised to increase and sustain the greater number of students volunteers by the universities into volunteering in community work, particularly during flood.

Generally, many Malaysians are aware of and agree with the benefits of being involved in volunteering activities. Nevertheless, Azizan Bahari (1995) claimed that there is still a considerable segment of the population that does not participate in volunteering activities. For instance, it has been shown by Kauthar Mohd Kamaludin's *et al.*, (2013) study that despite the demands for cancer care volunteers, the level of participation by Malaysians in volunteerism is still low and not at a satisfactory level. These concerns do have prior evidence. According to a study done by Mohd Kasim (2008), out of 100 respondents who are university students, 96 percent of them have low involvement in community volunteerism while only 4 percent have moderate involvement. Thus, it can be said that although students have been exposed to volunteerism, the number of active volunteers is still low. This is unfortunate as the positive impacts that volunteerism carries are undeniable. For this reason, this study aims at exploring the university students background for engaging in volunteerism and to examine their level of commitment towards volunteerism. Earlier, in a different study, Gage and Thapa (2012) also found similarly less studies have examined the young adult volunteers from the university students and therefore, there is a greater need to research on this topic as an under-researched population.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Therefore the study aims; (i) To explore the sociodemographic characteristics of university students who participate in volunteering activities; (ii) To gauge the level of university students' commitment towards volunteerism; (iii) To highlight several key implications of volunteerism towards a better society, economy and nation, and (iv) To propose ways to intensify level of volunteering activities among university students.

VOLUNTEERISM AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Earlier studies have noted that the basic definition of volunteerism is "... a helping action of an individual that is valued by him or her and yet, is not aimed directly at material gain or mandated or coerced by others" (Van Til, 1988, p. 6). Another concept of volunteerism was proposed by Turiman Suandi (1991) as the doctrine of a system based on participation that is not aimed directly at material gain or mandated or coerced by others within the voluntary sector. In other words, it is perceived as any un-coerced work intended to help others without a primary thought of financial gain.

Broader definitions and concepts of volunteerism have been well discussed in many studies. For example, Fischer and Schaffer (1993) added that volunteering is described as a gesture of helping others, contribution to community, feeling useful, a worthwhile course, religious concern, self-development, using free time, meaningful work and good feeling. In other words, volunteerism can be generally explained as the act of giving without expecting anything in return. In an earlier study done by Amar (2001), he clarified that volunteering can be closely associated with activities such as volunteers help to serve food to the homeless, reading to children at the local library, driving the elderly to the doctor, campaigning in an election, serving on a school board, volunteering at a hospital, performing as a docent in a museum or botanical garden, donating blood, fighting fires, or being the coach for a soccer or a little league baseball team. To explain further, volunteer programmes could be easily understood as consisting of the individuals who come together to help those in need or have a shared goal. Similarly, the concept of volunteerism is further elaborated by Mowen and Sujana (2005). They defined volunteers as people who help or aid others without any expectations of rewards, with volunteerism as merely an activity that is undertaken with the intent to improve the well-being of others. In summary, although volunteerism has been defined in numerous publications, a majority of them have similar interpretations at its core that it is unpaid, the value of the act exceeds the compensation received by the donor, benefits an individual or organisation and is taken on freely (Mutchler *et al.*, 2003; Ryan *et al.*, 2005). Further, a more recent study done by the United Nations Volunteer (2011) has also affirmed that volunteerism as the act of giving without expecting any return. It can be understood that volunteers may carry different interpretations as social workers get paid for their work while it might not be the case for volunteers.

Volunteering, however, as mentioned by Turiman Suandi (1991), has been so popular that the word "gotong royong" is a familiar term to Malaysians. Specifically, the spirit of volunteerism, among the Malays especially, is said to be embodied in the community practice of 'gotong-royong' (Uttam Singh, Sail, Abu Samah, Shah & Lumayah, 2005). This word can be literally translated as "carrying together" which implies the spirit of togetherness towards achieving common goals by working to help one another collectively. Therefore,

volunteerism is conceptualised in this study as any activity which is unpaid, undertaken freely and benefits others or the environment (beyond close family and friends). In relation to this, the broad definition includes both 'formal' volunteering (through a group or organisation) and 'informal' volunteering (as an individual). It is explained that formal volunteering comes in the form of formal "enlistment" to an organised group or institution with a well-defined social structure, role and function. On the other hand, informal volunteering is to engage in voluntary action outside the domain of organised groups or charitable organisations.

A special attention and emphasis should be given on the involvement of students' volunteerism as they happen to be a very significant population. University students are highly educated people and serve as the role models to the community. They also have the strong power of peer influences because most of them are young people (Newman & Newman, 2006) and intellectuals see them as a potential group to influence their peers positively. In addition to this, university students are also responsible to meet part of the goals of a university that is to serve the community. Thus, encouraging volunteerism as a new lifestyle for the multi-racial society in Malaysia must be addressed and the effort of targeting university students are appropriate as they are far more generous with their time and energy in the interest of community wellbeing.

According to Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) with regards to research on volunteerism and volunteer activities among students in higher learning institutions, many researchers have been concentrating on the characteristics of students who are involved in volunteer activities. A study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) shows that students in Australia who are involved in volunteerism are mostly university students rather than the youths who are not students. The research findings further support and are consistent with those of a longitudinal study conducted by Holdsworth (2010) in the United Kingdom. This study found that more than 15 percent of first year university students were involved in volunteer activities. It was also shown that the importance of various voluntary initiatives formed the basis of university students involvement in co-curricular activities. A volunteer survey conducted in Germany in 1999 indicated that students emphasized the opportunity to gain experience via volunteer work more compared to other age groups. They were also found to be more concerned with having their engagement in volunteerism being appreciated by others (Picot, 2000). Thus, based on this study, it is believed that students are more committed towards volunteerism as compared to other groups and one of the reasons is that, they are in the process of accumulating job market qualifications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The information on the sociodemographic profile and the level of commitment towards volunteerism among students in University of Malaya were surveyed. Drawn from the quantitative research strategy, a cross-sectional study and a self-administered questionnaire have been employed. In light of the above context, the current study data were collected and gathered at a given point-in time because the data were collected directly from the respondents. In that respect, this study successfully obtained feedbacks from the respondents. There were 400 completed questionnaires returned, but only 375 were usable. As mentioned earlier, this study focuses on exploring the demographic backgrounds and the level of students' commitment towards volunteerism. For this purpose, the data were collected from each individual student in University of Malaya located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and the

unit of analysis of this study is the individual. A self-administered survey was deployed to gather data. The constructs in this study were measured using Likert scales drawn from existing study. Hence, the commitment towards volunteerism with a 7-item scale is adopted with some modification from Turiman Suandi's (1991) study. The survey which consisted of questionnaire was conducted within the University of Malaya over the course of three weeks. For this purpose, the respondents were asked to evaluate their current level of commitment towards volunteerism based on the statements such as "I would always want to participate more and more in volunteer work" and "I would accept almost any kind of job assignment/work in order to keep myself involved in voluntary activities".

This studies covers only one public institution of higher learning in the Klang Valley area. Only current students of the University of Malaya were included in this study. This limitation was necessary to enable the researchers to give particular attention and adequate focus on one public institution of higher learning rather than all the public institutions of higher learning, in which, if being studied, would be a massive undertaking. Besides that, the study did not cover all students and was limited to the students who had a volunteering experience within or outside the University of Malaya. Therefore, only students who matched the scope of this study were asked to participate in this research.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Sociodemographic Profile of Students' Volunteering

Before illustrating the results, it is important to discuss the respondents' profile, including their gender, age, religion, education level, ethnicity, marital status, main financial support, memberships of any voluntary associations and previous life experience in volunteering work. Table 5.1 presents that majority of the respondents' gender was about equally distributed. It can be seen that slightly more than 58.7 percent were female compared to 41.3 percent were represented by male. The table shows that the number of female outnumbered the number of male as it reflects to the ratio of female students' population in the university. More than 96.3 percent of them were 25 years old and below compared to only a few of them, 3.7 percent were 26 years old and above. Nearly two thirds of the respondents were Muslim 67.2 percent compared to 32.8 percent were represented by Non-Muslim. Result also shows the current academic undertaking in the university. Furthermore, the respondents were largely composed of undergraduate level, 85.2 percent, only 14.5 percent of them were at postgraduate level. In addition, Table 5.1 illustrates that Malays comprised 62.1 percent, Chinese were represented by 20.8 percent and 7.7 percent were least represented by Indians. A large percentage of the respondents 92.8 percent were single and followed by 6.9 percent were married.

Table 1 shows the types of main financial support in University. Majority of them received scholarship and loan, which are 33.6 percent and 45.3 percent respectively. Only 16.8 percent of the students were financially supported by their parents to study in university. On the other hand, to support their studies in university, there were 3.5 percent and 8 percent of them used savings and others as their main financial support respectively. The largest part of respondents, which is 75.5 percent were not the members of a voluntary organisation compared to the rest 24.5 percent who becomes members and joined the voluntary organisation. The respondents largely had less than one year involvement in volunteering

activities, 67.5 percent. Whereas, there were only 32.5 percent of the respondents whom their duration of involvement was exactly and also surpassed 1 year.

Table 1:
 Summary of Demographic Background of Students

Demographic Background of Students	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	155	41.3
Female	220	58.7
Age of respondents		
25 and below	361	96.3
26 and above	14	3.7
Religion		
Muslim	252	67.2
Non Muslim	123	32.8
Education Level		
Undergraduate	320	85.3
Postgraduates	55	14.7
Ethnicity		
Malays	233	62.1
Chinese	78	20.8
Indian	29	7.7
Others	35	9.3
Marital Status		
Single	348	92.8
Married	26	6.9
Main Financial Support		
Scholarship	126	33.6
Loan	170	45.3
Savings	13	3.5
Parents	63	16.8
Others	3	8
Membership of a voluntary organisations		
Member	92	24.5
Non member	283	75.5
Years of life experience		
Less than 1 year	253	67.5
1 year and above	122	32.5

Level of Students' Commitment towards Volunteerism

Table 2 illustrates the level of students' commitment towards volunteerism. The percentage and average mean of respondents' response were analysed and shown. Table 2 indicates the measure for students' commitment towards volunteerism that consists of 11 items. The result found that majority of respondents 86.4 percent said that they disagreed "My decision to get involved in volunteering activities is a mistake on my part (R)" (item 10) *I strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree*. This item had recorded the highest mean for the students' commitment towards volunteerism $M (5.96)$, $SD (1.61)$. The results also showed that 85.1 percent of the respondents disagreed that "I would avoid myself from joining any volunteering activities" (item 8) *I strongly agree to 7 strongly disagree*. This statement recorded was the second highest mean $M (5.03)$, $SD (1.52)$.

Moreover, a large percentage of the respondents, which is 81.8 also committed that "I would always want to participate more and more in volunteer work" (item 4) *I strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree*. On the other hand, 80.8 per cent of the respondents admitted that

"I am proud to tell others that I am a volunteer" (item 2) *I strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree*. It is worth mentioning that, slightly more than 64.5 percent of them disagreed that "Volunteerism would contribute little impact to my life (R)" (item 9) *I strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree* and the lowest mean recorded was *M (4.07), SD (1.60)*. Therefore, the level of students' commitment towards volunteerism *M (4.70), SD (0.91)* suggests that the students' of University of Malaya had a moderate level of commitment towards volunteerism.

Table 5.2:
Level of Students' Commitment towards Volunteerism

No	Item	Low ← → High							Avg. M	SD
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
		F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	4.70	0.91
<i>Level of Students' Commitment towards Volunteerism</i>										
									M Percent	SD
1	I would accept almost any kind of job assignment/work in order to keep myself involved in voluntary activities.	15 4	30 8	31 8.3	151 40.3	78 20.8	56 14.9	14 3.7	4.26 79.7	1.36
2	I am proud to tell others that I am a volunteer.	15 4	18 4.8	39 10.4	106 28.3	86 22.9	66 17.6	45 12	4.62 80.8	1.51
3	I continue to volunteer to help others who are in need no matter how tired or busy I am.	7 1.9	22 5.9	33 8.8	147 39.2	77 20.5	64 17.1	25 6.7	4.49 83.5	1.32
4	I would always want to participate more and more in volunteer work.	8 2.1	20 5.3	40 10.7	125 33.3	99 26.4	51 13.6	32 8.5	4.51 81.8	1.35
5	I am extremely glad that I am involved in voluntary work.	4 1.1	15 4.0	28 7.5	115 30.7	104 27.7	75 20	34 9.1	4.76 87.5	1.28
6	I am extremely glad that I chose volunteerism as part of my mission in life.	3 .8	22 5.9	30 8	122 32.5	95 25.3	67 17.9	36 9.6	4.68 85.3	1.33
7	I always make sure that my values and values of voluntary work are very similar.	4 1.1	15 4.0	32 8.5	130 34.7	86 22.9	79 21.1	29 7.7	4.69 86.4	1.28
8	I would avoid myself from joining any volunteering activities. (R)	2 .5	15 4.0	39 10.4	105 28	58 15.5	63 16.8	93 24.8	5.03 85.1	1.52
9	Volunteerism would contribute little impact to my life. (R)	15 4	52 13.9	66 17.6	113 30.1	53 14.1	40 10.7	36 9.6	4.07 64.5	1.60
10	My decision to get involved in volunteering activities is a mistake on my part.(R)	5 1.3	14 3.7	32 8.5	89 23.7	51 13.6	57 15.2	127 33.9	5.96 86.4	1.61
11	There is not too much to be gained with my involvement in voluntary activities. (R)	2 .5	28 7.5	26 6.9	108 28.8	57 15.2	67 17.9	87 23.2	4.97 85.1	1.56

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Level of Students' Commitment towards Volunteerism

The results obtained for this study demonstrated that majority of respondents, 86.4 percent said that they disagreed "My decision to get involved in volunteering activities is a mistake on my part". While 80.8 percent of the respondents admitted that "I am proud to tell

others that I am a volunteer". Therefore, based on the reported findings, the students of University of Malaya had a moderate level of commitment towards volunteerism.

The findings of this study are quite equivalent with the previous study conducted by Turiman Suandi (1991). Based on his study, most of the volunteers had high level of commitment in volunteering activities organised by 4B youth organisations. This is probably because there is a high level of volunteerism spirit among these 4B youth's volunteers. This suggested that a high level of commitment should be maintained and further efforts should be made to improve the performance of 4B youth organisations. Additionally, the findings of this present study were comparable to those in the sampled of universities in five countries which are Australia, New Zealand, UK, Canada and United States. The survey reported by Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx (2009) found that majority of the university students had a high level of volunteerism. It explains that the findings could be seen as positive for educational institutions and governments that seek to encourage volunteerism by students and young people.

The results are also in parallel with the findings of Brewis, Russell and Holdsworth (2010) on the high levels of volunteering among students. Most doubtless explanation is that majority of students perceived volunteering can play an important role in developing their community awareness and integration into communities outside the university. Therefore, the above evidence supports and proves the current findings that most of the respondents which is 85.1 percent disagreed that "I would avoid myself from joining any volunteering activities".

Other than that, majority of the students also admitted that "I would always want to participate more and more in volunteer work". In an earlier study by Clary *et al.*, (1998) in the University of Minnesota, they discovered that the volunteers tended to continue their services as the benefits they gained from the volunteering activities confirm their motivation. This further reaffirmed the findings of the current study in the University of Malaya. It is worth mentioning that, slightly more than 64.5 percent of them disagreed that "Volunteerism would contribute little impact to my life". This reported finding can be explained by Jeminez *et al.*'s (2010) study where they have found out that people will remain as volunteers in so far as this satisfies the motivation that are relevant to them. Further to that, the findings seem to be in line with the Malaysian cultural tradition of "*gotong royong*", or carrying together spirit which is cooperation among the people. This is a good starting point and a challenge for public higher learning institutions to provide further activities to encourage and guide students to be involved in volunteerism.

CONCLUSION

The findings obtained in this study demonstrated the wide-ranging characteristics of the majority of the volunteers in the University of Malaya. Majority of the respondents were 25 years old and below. The composition of the respondents is equally distributed between male and female volunteers. Majority of the respondents were in undergraduate level. Most of the respondents were Malays. Larger proportion of them received loan and scholarship as their main financial support in University. Most of the volunteers were not taking part in any volunteering club or associations, neither inside nor outside the university. Only more than 25 percent of them were the members and partook in the voluntary organisations and clubs. More than half of the total respondents had less than 1 year length involvement in volunteering

activities prior coming to University of Malaya. Results also indicated that most of the students' volunteers had a moderate level of commitment towards volunteerism.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this study help to understand better on the level of students' commitment towards volunteerism in University of Malaya. This type of understanding is crucial to the survival and effectiveness of NGOs, voluntary associations and other non profit organisations which depend a great deal on volunteers especially the university students. The findings could serve and bring several impacts to the society, economy and nation as follow:

i) Society

The society can be benefited from the volunteering activities as most of the programmes and projects require a lot of manpower and resources to be executed. By having a pool numbers of volunteers, the society could reduce the financial costs of community activities. Volunteering activities should be regarded as a continued effort and long-term commitment to help the communities get back on their feet. On top of that, when most of the NGOs and Voluntary Associations are supplied with greater numbers of volunteer, the society may as well receiving a spill over effect in terms of its ability to create a caring and responsible society. In addition, with the stronger workforce of volunteers to carry out activities, they can play a supportive roles to those in need. For example, without the helps from the volunteers in the flood incidence in East Coast States of Malaysia, the relief response and aids would be slow and could not reach to the flood victims.

ii) Economy

Fostering and encouraging voluntary activities do not require fund or huge allocation from the government budget, but the willingness and sincerity among the people to contribute to the society, especially the needy. Hence, volunteerism indirectly helps the country to reduce and channel its expenditure to the other vital sectors. Due to the budgetary challenges that the governments are confronting, and the demand for health care, human services, recreation, and educational programmes that keeps on bulking up, most of the governments have become increasingly dependent on the services provided by volunteers.

iii) Nation Building

When the people especially the future generation is empowered with the volunteerism spirit among themselves, it is in line with the vision of becoming high income nation by 2020. Volunteerism could educate the youths to become responsible citizens. The nation can be proud of being a voluntary hub and model, as what a developed nation like the Japanese have embedded volunteerism as a part of their culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTION

The studies proposes few recommendations specially to intensify level of volunteering activities among university students as follow:

First recommendation to intensify level of volunteering activities among university students is through rewards and recognition. In order to be effective, the volunteering programme organisers may include both instruments for students volunteering. It is emphasised by Prugsamatz (2012) that recognition and reward can assist students to enhance their personal value and commitment to the program, gain peer respect and develop a desire for further participation within their field. It is also seen as a positive effort that encourage students and the programme as well as fosters further achievement with the said recognition. It is worth mentioning some students will feel satisfied with their participation without seeking rewards or recognition for their volunteering efforts. However, to increase level of participation among students' volunteering activities, other students may be more inclined to participate if they know their involvement will be rewarded and/or recognised.

Apart from that, the spirits towards social advocate for students' volunteering should be empowered to ensure their effective commitment into volunteering works. Empowerment of young people is when they have the major say over all the things that affect their everyday lives. Besides, youth advocacy provides the opportunity to young people especially university students to involve others young people to take responsibility not only for young people, but by and with young people for the benefits of the wider community. The students' community must be passionate about helping the sick and disadvantaged group in the society rather than asking for others to offer their helps and actions. The young people should be always ready so they can support, inform and educate other young people and refer to each other in crisis situations. In other words, they are readily available whenever they are needed and required not only during the state of emergency. In addition to that, being a social advocates they are more willing to contribute their efforts and time to provide some good to the university and wider community. In return, they will have the satisfaction of knowing that their time is making a difference in the life of their community.

SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Firstly, the study should be further suggested to be undertaken in the Malaysian context. Majority of the researches on this area have been carried out in the developed countries such as US, Australia, Canada and UK. However there have been less studies that have been conducted in Malaysia especially among the University Students. Further research is recommended to explore more on the level of students' commitment towards volunteerism.

Next, researchers could be suggested to examine the moderating and mediating effects of socio demographic factors in the relationships between antecedents and level of volunteering commitment. Therefore more advances finding could be discovered in spite of the linear correlation between the antecedents and their level of commitment in volunteering activities.

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