

***Community Based Learning in Business Education:
Is It Effective and What Are the Challenges?***

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Abstract

Community Based Learning has been practiced by Higher Education Institution in Malaysia with the aspiration to produce graduates who are capable to apply the theories and concepts to real-life context. However, there has been little information about its' effectiveness. This study intends to investigate the effectiveness of Community Based Learning in Business Program particularly the capstone project in Business Program offered by Polytechnic Malaysia and the challenges faced by the students. The qualitative method is employed to gather the reflections on the process and outcome of the experience via interviews with 36 students from 2 cohorts. Thematic analysis is used to interpret the data and the findings show that the capstone project activates the learning outcomes of academic knowledge, general skills, practical competencies, personal growth and civic responsibility while lack of resources and self-incompetence are the two main challenges faced by students. The findings of this study offer insights into the process of aligning related policy with Community Based Learning as well as demonstrating support for Community Based Learning.

Keywords: Community-Based Learning, Capstone Project, Effectiveness of Capstone Project

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Introduction

Community-Based Learning (CBL) is a form of learning that enables students, in collaboration with local businesses, to directly address identified real-life issues related to their course subject. By putting their theoretical knowledge into practice, CBL students not only help the firms achieve their goals and missions but also help them build transferable abilities and become more prepared for the real world. This helps them gain experience and talents that will be useful in their future undertakings. Students who engage in this kind of learning have the chance to learn in non-traditional academic settings and gain practical experience in their chosen fields and future professions. Students collaborate in small groups to find creative answers to actual business challenges while also learning important lessons about the duties and demands of the working world. This provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their leadership and management abilities and comprehend the effects of their choices in a “safe space”.

The higher education institutions in Malaysia have been using community-based learning (CBL) as one of their teaching and learning methodologies with the goal of producing graduates who can apply theories and concepts to real-life situations in conjunction with the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (MEB) 2015–2025, which lays out the principles that higher education institutions must follow in order to generate graduates who can compete on a global scale and meet the needs of stakeholders in Malaysia. Higher education institutions in Malaysia have used a variety of approaches to implement community-based learning, including problem-based learning, project-based learning, community case studies, learning via volunteer work, discipline-based projects, and capstone projects (Maharam et al., 2019). These different approaches have been employed in courses that have been integrated, embedded, stand-alone, or infused.

When students graduate from higher education institutions and enter the workforce, they should be prepared with the necessary knowledge and skills. In business-related programs, this means knowing the technical skills and information required by the industry, as well as the business theories and concepts. Through the capstone project—a community-based learning that combines service learning and problem-based learning—Polytechnics in Malaysia, as TVET providers, give students the chance to apply the material they have learned in class to a real-world scenario, complete with the limitations and uncertainties inherent in practice. In this project, students not only apply the knowledge they have learned in a course but also assist the community partners, especially the small and medium enterprises.

The capstone project is a final assignment intended to evaluate the abilities, know-how, and proficiency that students have developed. It is the culminating experience of academic life, as the name implies, and occurs prior to graduation. All students are expected to complete the project because it provides them with the final credits needed to pass the course. Students must integrate relevant service work in the business community with the knowledge they have gained throughout their coursework for their capstone project. The goal is either exploring a new topic or synthesizing students’ understanding of their discipline. Such a project could be as basic as conducting topic research, analyzing a novel approach or method, creating a business plan, investigating historical figures or events, or even coming up with the idea for a tool, product, or service. In addition to creating the written report, a capstone project presentation functions as a sort of exposition where the students showcase their project and demonstrate their preparedness to enter the business world.

Numerous tertiary education institutions have started offering capstone courses due to the widespread recognition of these programs as effective means of imparting knowledge and skills that are relevant to the workplace. As a result, a lot of study on capstone courses and their effects has been conducted. However, there has been little information about its' effectiveness from the perspective of students. Hence, this study intends to provide a coherent and compact view of business capstones by investigating the effectiveness of community-based learning in business programs, particularly the capstone project in business programs, from the students' perspective and also the challenges faced by the students.

Literature Review

Giving students hands-on experience with the tools, approaches, concepts, and best practices that are taught in previous courses more conceptually is the main goal of a capstone project. However, the majority of research on capstone design courses has focused primarily on course outcomes, pedagogy, structure, and assessment (Badir et al., 2023). Limited studies have addressed the perspectives of students with respect to the benefits of capstone courses. For instance, recent studies have linked community-based learning to a number of advantages, including increased student learning (Yusof et al., 2020) and practical experience (Meyer et al., 2016); civic engagement and the reciprocal relationship between campus and community (Olberding and Hacker, 2015); enhanced student civic leadership and social responsibility (Weiler et al., 2013); and deeper comprehension of course contents (Dienhart et al., 2016).

According to Carlisle et al. (2020), there is positive evidence supporting the integration of learning and community. This is particularly true in light of the fresh skill set that the students acquired on a personal and professional level, improving their sense of self-worth, social confidence, and public participation. In support, Arcos-Alonso et al. (2021) postulate that community-based learning improves students' learning effectiveness because they utilize the knowledge they acquire in the classroom to subsequently translate it into community contributions. This maintains their personal development and creates a bond of knowledge about the changing world. In addition, a recent study further reveals that students expressed a stronger sense of responsibility for their education and an appreciation for the long-term benefits of interacting with community partners (Goggins and Hajdukiewicz, 2022), while Shah et al. (2023) add to the literature by showing that community-based learning promotes students' understanding in a "real-world" context within the community (as a subset of workplace learning) and "beyond the confines of a university degree" in addition to helping them gain important employability skills through a workplace learning experience. Another noteworthy finding is by Hamzah et al. (2023), who demonstrate that the students were being prepared on how to handle interactions with other stakeholders. The skills needed, such as leadership and communication skills that are crucial for social interactions, were developed during this period.

Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to understand the students' perceptions of whether the capstone course is beneficial and what the challenges are. In order to gain in-depth insights, the qualitative method was employed. Individual in-depth interviews lasting approximately 20–30 minutes were conducted at Politeknik Kuching Sarawak in Malaysia. The questions centered on students' experiences in the capstone course in terms of the benefits they believed they gained and the challenges they encountered. The Business Project is a core

component in the final year of the three-year-long Diploma in Business Studies program. A total of 36 students from two cohorts were sought until saturation was achieved. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Major themes were identified. The method of peer debriefing was employed to validate the coding framework and analysis of the findings, in which initial codes and preliminary themes were discussed with the entire research team. This method adheres to the RATS (relevance, appropriateness, transparency, and soundness) criteria for qualitative research.

Findings and Discussions

The thematic areas can be grouped into two broad categories: the perceived benefits of capstone projects by students and the challenges faced by students in capstone projects. A total of four themes emerged from the analysis of perceived benefits of capstone projects by students: (i) activating the learning outcomes of academic knowledge; (ii) promoting generic skills; (iii) sharpening practical competencies; and (iv) fostering personal growth and civic responsibility.

(i) Activating the Learning Outcomes of Academic Knowledge

The capstone project helps students assess their competency and preparedness and acts as a culminating intellectual and academic experience for them. It requires students to apply the knowledge and abilities they have learned during their studies while working independently on a subject or issue that the firms are facing. The students also indicate that they gained higher generalized self-efficacy and skills via capstone projects when compared to the traditional course. The respondents highlighted that the capstone project involves students identifying problems in the real business world. They are then challenged to come up with solutions for the issue by conducting a thorough study and analyzing all of the available data to generate possible solutions for the problem. The respondents perceived the capstone project as an opportunity to collaborate on a project that calls for them to use the information and abilities they have gained in their individual subjects of study. Important topics covered in the course include problem-solving, communication, team building, project management, and project planning.

(ii) Promoting Generic Skills

Students have to communicate with small and medium enterprises as part of the capstone course. Despite the fact that they had dealt with the community via other activities, a number of them noted that the communication style in the capstone course was different. Students conducted interviews to ascertain the enterprise's needs and negotiate the project scope. They also showcased their ideas to the enterprise during the project. The respondents thought that these skills had improved as a result of the capstone course. Many respondents mentioned that the project had been their first chance to communicate with a genuine client and that it had given them lots of opportunities to learn.

Students who complete a capstone project are better able to lead others and function successfully in a group. They communicate with others both orally and nonverbally for a variety of reasons, and they use a variety of media to convey ideas and convey meaning. Additionally, they acquire information, research concepts, and express their thoughts through the use of information and communication technologies. The respondents indicated that in order to identify an issue, create and carry out a project plan, and effectively communicate

their results, they must collaborate in teams. An effective communication strategy is also emphasized in a capstone project course, both with internal team members and external stakeholders. Students gain the teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking abilities necessary for success in their future occupations through this course.

(iii) Sharpening Practical Competencies

Students have the chance to work on an analytics project in the real business world during their capstone course. Through their interactions with business stakeholders and their successful completion of team-based business analytics projects within a commercial firm using the firm's data, the students obtained actual experience in delivering self-directed and experiential learning. The capstone project is also intended to test students' critical thinking abilities, help them solve challenging issues, and show that they are prepared for jobs in their profession. It is frequently the high point of their academic career and can give them experience and abilities that will be useful in their future undertakings.

Apart from that, capstone projects require independent thought, time management, and self-direction. Students learn critical thinking, communication, flexibility, and project management through planning, carrying out, and commenting on their projects. It is noteworthy to highlight that the respondents perceived that, in contrast to standard exams or theoretical assignments, through this practical experience, they are able to close the gap between theory and practice, improving their ability to solve problems and getting ready for whatever obstacles they may face in the workplace in the future.

(iv) Fostering Personal Growth and Civic Responsibility

The capstone project encourages students to plan their future more thoughtfully, identify their primary goals, explore career options, and get practical experience that will benefit them in the workplace. It is a relatively new approach to the typical "placement" or "internship," and it aids students in navigating their careers on a certain path. When students are given the opportunity to apply what they have learned in the classroom, they not only discover their own personal strengths and acquire a set of transferrable abilities, but they also gain professional knowledge from working with community partners. It also boosts personal inspiration, as these kinds of tasks necessitate creative effort on subjects that each person finds fascinating, which increases inspiration. The respondents also indicated that the capstone project provides them with the opportunity to realize their potential as first-time managers by enabling them to make decisions in the real world. This has resulted in a sense of accomplishment and pride in their achievements, as they have the opportunity to showcase their knowledge and skills to a wider audience, including lecturers, peers, and potential employers.

Through the capstone project activities, students also develop an inclusive and open view of the world around them by learning about other cultures and encouraging respect for those who are different from them. They can also speak with people who hold opinions and views that differ from their own. Besides, it also teaches students how to positively impact society, giving them greater confidence and clarifying their self-perception. In the end, these advantages help students develop into well-rounded individuals who not only have confidence in themselves but also work to improve the environment in which they live.

As for challenges faced by students, two themes have been identified: (i) lack of resources and (ii) self-incompetence.

(i) Lack of Resources

Creating a successful solution for the capstone project that satisfies the objectives of the community partner and learning requires a lot of valuable effort. Success is less probable if logistical issues with scheduling, transportation, or communicating get worse. Inadequate support and direction from the community partners also contribute to the challenges encountered by the students. In this regard, the students faced difficulties connecting and communicating with their community counterparts in order to build ideas and consult with the community on its concerns. As a result, there may be instances while working with the community that present difficulties for lecturers and students since diverse viewpoints and understandings of the problems that call for certain solutions exist on both sides.

(ii) Self-Incompetence

Notwithstanding the benefits of a capstone project, it is necessary to take into account the students' readiness to conduct the capstone project. Students may not be prepared well enough to complete a capstone project successfully, and this will limit the learning experience as well as fail to help their community partner. Failure can occur in any educational environment, but it can be especially concerning and more worrisome for educators and students because of the responsibilities they may have to community partners. Students were unable to optimize their knowledge and skills learned, especially if their lecturers did not have the experience to help them connect to real-world business scenarios. Unforeseen obstacles may be encountered that limit the project outcome in some way in the context of real-world complexities and challenges.

Conclusion

The inclusion of a community-based learning environment in business-related programs can enhance students' confidence in knowledge application and their ability to connect with the business world. Students are exposed to a broad variety of fresh viewpoints and experiences through their capstone project that are not covered in class. It is imperative to arm oneself with the information and abilities needed to make oneself a desirable candidate for recruiters. Capstone projects are a way for academic institutions to help students get ready for the workforce. Students would be required to solve actual business challenges while also honing their soft skills. The competencies and credentials acquired via a capstone project can greatly augment a student's preparedness for the labor market or for additional academic endeavors, making them more competitive in their selected domain. However, it should be noted that the particular advantages will vary based on the project's type and the student's level of dedication and work. Nevertheless, students, lecturers, institutions, and communities would all benefit from this kind of education since it would instill a sense of civic responsibility and citizenship traits like cooperation, leadership, tolerance for cultural differences, interpersonal skills, and the capacity to start change in the community.

Prior to engaging in capstone projects, a needs analysis with the community is required to guarantee that the capabilities of the students and business needs are matched. In order to optimize capstone project outcomes, higher education institutions need to strategically assign a single center to lead community networking initiatives. It would be feasible to optimize the

advantages of both "worlds" with students able to satisfy learning objectives and cultivate their own convictions and skill sets in addition to serving the real demands of the business sectors. Higher education institutions also need to be aware of potential problems that could occur when managing capstone projects, like conflicts and time management. These challenges highlight the importance of careful planning, resource allocation, and support for both students and lecturers in order to effectively implement the capstone course. Finally, this study has presented the students' perceptions of the benefits of a capstone course and the challenges they faced. Further studies, however, are needed to capture other stakeholders' views, especially the business stakeholder in the capstone courses.

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