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Perspectives from Asia and Europe

Opinion | Kuhan Pillai

Universities Should Mandate Students to Get Involved in Student Volunteering and Community Projects

Being born and bred in a small town on the East Coast of Malaysia, I have always been aware of education inequality between the sub-urban and rural population of Malaysia. My parents felt studying here would not bring me any far. I was then sent to a boarding school in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. Five years studying in Kuala Lumpur, I realised that I have overlooked the poverty enveloping some communities in Kuala Lumpur. I felt ashamed that the capital city could store such a major social problem. In 2016, I returned home, not quite finding home to be the same. I appreciated that I was spared from the inconveniences that had burdened my family whilst I was studying. That made me realise that inequality in education also exists within the subpopulations of urban cities such as Kuala Lumpur and should not be overlooked.

In 2017, whilst in the process of finding a place I could belong to, I came to know of The Kalsom Movement and their work to combat educational inequality since 1994. I could not deny that I felt motivated to be part of their journey and volunteering with them. Three years have passed, and I have never found anything more beautiful in shaping myself than volunteering. I discovered my leadership potentials there while sharpening my organisational skills and being more perceptive of issues regarding education in Malaysia.

Being a student volunteer and involved in community projects has always been a really beautiful journey. I feel that we bring out the best in each other. Throughout my life, I've always been overshadowed by other people and afraid to be who I am because I was afraid people would judge. However, being involved in student volunteering and community projects has made me believe in myself more than I ever have. Nevertheless, this has never been the case for many students pursuing tertiary education. Often only similar faces are seen both in student volunteering and community projects which is only due to the lack of awareness. The University of Maryland's Do-Good Institute, which studies civics

finds that about 25 percent of teenagers volunteered in 2015, down from 28 percent in 2005—ending 30 years of rising volunteerism among high-school-age Americans. However, the rate of student volunteerism and community projects in Singapore has almost doubled from 2014 to 2016, according to a survey conducted by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC). One reason for Singapore's higher, and increasing, rates of volunteerism for school-going youth is the Community Involvement Programme launched in 1997. The programme requires primary, secondary and junior college students to spend time on community work, such as collecting donations on flag day or helping out at welfare homes and public libraries. In 2012, the programme was reframed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as what it called a "value in action" scheme. While Sir Anthony Seldon, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham, acceded that there is a range of survey findings show that young people want to give up their time for unpaid activities that help others and support the environment but many lack the encouragement, opportunities and structure to become more fully involved.

What exactly we can do to curb this problem? Born in the '90s, I believe that I am lucky to see with my own eyes some drastic policies implemented by the government. One of the policies which I think worked best for me was the Teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (PPSMI) policy, in which Science and Mathematics were taught and learnt in English to develop and enhance English-language proficiency in Malaysia. Similarly, to encourage the involvement of students, such policies to mandate them in student volunteering and community projects would be beneficial. I am a firm believer that every one of us has the innate talents to make the world a better place and to help someone else, but perhaps we have held back and need a little push to achieve that.

As an example, in Venice High School in Los Angeles, California, the students are required to perform 10 hours of community service a year to attend the graduation ceremony. This is excellent preparation for the future as the students can explore different career options. For example, if someone is interested in becoming a teacher, he or she can do tutoring; if his or her interest in health care, working in a hospital would be beneficial. Few schools in Los Angeles have a similar mandate, yet this policy has been a hot topic throughout the city. The idea to make volunteering and community work mandatory is contradictory in terms. Nevertheless, such a policy is required to create a win-win situation for all the stakeholders involved. Promoting student volunteering and community projects in universities is a priority among English politicians and academia. They substantiated that volunteering creates important shifts in motivations, distinguishing between traditional forms of altruistic or collective modes and emerging reflexive volunteering which focuses more on individualised needs and experiences.

The policy of mandating students to volunteering and involvement in community projects is good provided that it is not radically imposed. This was evident when the PPSMI policy was introduced abruptly in Malaysia, it had to be revoked due to a backlash from the communities themselves.

To avoid any failure, the risk has to be examined. First, formalising volunteering activities within the curriculum and providing accreditation to enhance students learning do not necessarily inculcate the spirit of volunteerism within students, hence conscientious implementation is vital. Second, a critical perspective is necessary to ensure that volunteering neither normalises students to social inequalities nor perpetuates social injustice. Third, students ought to know the outcomes of volunteering, hence clear advocacy is needed. Fourth, the students' motivation and forms of engagement differs, hence they have to categorise according to their interest in the variety of volunteering activities present. Fifth, lack of impact assessment renders students to not understand as a whole only due to its vulnerability of lack in impact assessment, hence universities should provide aid in the reporting process and valuing the success rate of the activities.

In conclusion, the initiatives to promote student volunteering and community projects in Malaysian universities have been largely influenced by the US experience, where the moral, cultural and social conditions are very different from our reality. However, we should still welcome the initiative in Asia.