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**The 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Marketing and Retailing****STUDENT LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES OF ONLINE CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN A MALAYSIAN LOCAL UNIVERSITY**

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**Abstract**

Students can build leadership abilities through participating in co-curricular activities like competitions, clubs, and societies or being part of the student representative council in the university. However, digital education has made these activities more challenging since they are not physically present on campus. Thus, this research explores the experiences of student leaders participating in online co-curricular activities to identify the most effective approach so that all students, regardless of their mode of study, can participate in these programs and graduate with leadership skills as part of the employment preparation. This exploratory research applies a qualitative method where semi-structured interviews with student leaders were conducted for data collection before the interview transcripts were thematically analysed. Technology, lack of innovation, low participation, and preparedness were the identified hurdles of online co-curricular activities. Online co-curricular activities also provide benefits including accessibility, improved digital skills, creativity, and the ability to manage crises. In the subsequent research, researchers may engage in empirical quantitative investigations to validate the correlations discovered in this research.

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**1. Introduction**

One of the most important skills for graduates is leadership. Students in higher education institutions develop their leadership skills not only in class but also through co-curricular activities. Students who participate in co-curricular activities gain hands-on experience and learn how to solve problems, devise strategies to ensure the success of their program or activities, communicate with and influence others, and many other skills that develop their leadership character. Problem-solving, vision, good decision-making, innovativeness, and self-awareness are some of the leadership traits that university students should be exposed to early on. As part of the employment preparation, these characteristics are very important to them.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic situation has limited students' involvement in online co-curricular activities, many universities were able to encourage students to get involved in the activities. Student leaders with the help of the student activities department of the respective institutions managed to organise a lot of online events and activities to develop students' soft skills and other relevant skills. After the pandemic is over, there are students and potential students shown interest in pursuing their studies in online mode. Thus it is time for institutes of higher learning to incorporate online co-curricular activities into their student development programs to meet the national goal of developing future-proof talents for a high-tech nation by 2030 (MySTIE). The alternative methods of student development programs and activities aimed to prepare students with relevant skills by utilizing internet technology, particularly 4G/5G connectivity, which is one of the key technology drivers in MySTIE and embedding them in the Education sectors as key socio-economic drivers of the MySTIE framework.

### **1.1. Malaysia Talent Development**

One of the targets of SDG 4 – Quality Education is to "substantially increase the number of youth and adults with relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship." In this regard, Malaysia's national goal for a high-tech nation by 2030 (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2020) is focusing on developing future-proof talents using the MySTIE framework (Hogan et al., 2021). As a result, the role of institutes of higher learning in developing skilled young talents is critical to achieving the goal since young professional talents normally undergo higher education before their employment.

Higher learning institutions are the place where future leaders are being developed not only through teaching and learning activities but many other activities (Saaludin et al., 2020). By participating in a range of programs and activities, in institutes of higher learning students can develop their critical thinking, communication, and management skills, being a responsible person that allow them to better serve the community (Hassan et al., 2018).

### **1.2. Students and Skill Development**

Co-curricular activities are activities that take place outside of the classroom, outside of the teaching and learning syllabus, or that are not officially part of an academic program's academic plan (Ab Ghani et al., 2020). Students' substantial involvement in co-curricular activities is viewed as the ideal medium for developing leadership qualities, improving social skills, building up motivation, and contributing to the student's growth (Mowrer, 2021). By participating in co-curricular activities, students

will be able to develop their skills especially when given opportunities to lead, communicate, make decisions, organise events, plan, etc.

A study involving engineering students from a Canadian university discovered that participation in co-curricular activities had a significant impact on the student's development, including their leadership skills and identity (Daniow & Klassen, 2018). Buckley et al. (2020) on their research on pharmaceutical students highlighted that leadership programs are important to foster leadership skills among pharmaceutical students to fulfill the leadership gap within the profession with an emphasis on emotional intelligence.

Students with strong leadership skills will have higher self-esteem and better career goals thus having a better chance for better employment and future (LeMire et al., 2018). In their study, Saaludin et al. (2020) discovered that students are expected to have communication and teamwork skills, as well as creative and visionary thinking, and to be always committed, well-organised, and passionate in their job. A study of clinicians participating in an e-leadership program discovered that the core skills and competencies that clinicians must have to lead, such as problem-solving and communication abilities, high levels of emotional intelligence, and a thorough understanding of topics such as quality improvement, payment, and health systems, are essential (Sullivan et al., 2021).

Soffel (2016) highlighted that 21st-Century skills can be divided into (i) Foundational literacies skills (Literacy, Numeracy, Scientific literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy, Cultural and civic literacy); (ii) Competencies skills (critical thinking/problem-solving, Creativity, Communication, Collaboration); and (iii) Curiosity, Initiative, Persistence/grit, Adaptability, Leadership, and Social and cultural awareness). The competencies and character qualities skills are important skills that can be developed through co-curricular activities in the institute of higher learning while the foundational literacies are normally covered in the academic curriculum. However, this research will only focus on the competencies and character quality aspects of the students in institutes of higher learning.

### **1.3. Technology and Learning Effectiveness.**

In the education sector, the use of technology in teaching and learning is not new. e-learning platforms, digital learning tools, blended learning, mobile learning, and a variety of other technologies have been used in education to enhance learning experiences, promote collaboration, expand access to higher education, and improve classroom engagement. There is a lot of extensive research and studies investigating the usage, benefits, effectiveness, and challenges of technologies in teaching and learning deliveries.

Technologies can boost student engagement and lead to improved student learning outcomes (Hogan et al., 2021). Virtual learning spaces are being developed in educational institutions with embedded technologies to enable better learning experiences anywhere and at any time. With the benefits gained from technologies in teaching and learning delivery, those participating in virtual co-curricular activities can also gain similar benefits, which aid in meeting the activities' objectives. The perceived usefulness and ease of use of online learning are influenced by social trust (Alshurafat et al., 2021) in which opportunity, motivation, and the ability to cooperate are essential factors for the formation or accumulation of social capital (Venter, 2019).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way teaching and learning are conducted in institutes of higher learning where the movement control order (MCO) and social distancing rules are applied. Under the same rules, students are not permitted to participate in and organise co-curricular activities like before. Almost all co-curricular activities must be carried out virtually where students perform, participate in, and organise online events and activities on online platforms with the help of internet technology and strong connectivity in the online environment. Following the pandemic, students now have the option of taking classes and studying online. In an era where students must have both academic and non-academic knowledge and skills, there must be a proper design of online co-curricular activities in place. As a result, we must learn about students' experiences with online co-curricular activities so that we can address the challenges and opportunities of these activities.

## **3. Research Questions**

Thus, guided by a research question i.e. what the student leaders' perspectives towards online co-curricular activities are based on their experiences participating and organising online co-curricular activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research explores the challenges and benefits of online co-curricular activities to discover how to make the online co-curricular activities more effective and interesting. The findings from this research will be useful guidance for higher education institutions in designing more effective online co-curricular activities so that more students will benefit from the activities regardless of their mode of study.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

Overall, this research aims to address the challenges and opportunities of online co-curricular activities and provide practical recommendations to institutions to support student leadership development in the digital age.

## **5. Research Methods**

This exploratory research applied qualitative research methodology where data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. The purposive sampling method was used in identifying the participants for the interviews. The criteria set for the selection of participants are (i) the participants are student leaders from any Malaysian institute of higher learning. Student leaders can be among the student representative council or anyone holding a high position in any club and society in the universities such as President, Vice President, Secretary, and other high committees, and (ii) the student leaders must be experienced in organising or participating in online co-curricular activities.

Interview questions were designed based on the research questions and the interviews were conducted using the online platform i.e. Google Meet due to the distance in geographical locations and the student leaders' availability. 15 participants from five different institutes of higher learning were interviewed, and their background is summarized in Table 1, with a specific participant code assigned to

each of them for audit trail purposes. Data has reached its saturation level at Participant 8 therefore 14 participants are more than sufficient to ensure that the findings of this research is rigorous and valid. Saturation has become a critical component of qualitative research, aiding in the collection of robust and valid data (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). According to Morse (2015), the most frequently touted guarantee of qualitative rigor offered by authors to reviewers and readers is saturation.

To avoid bias and ensure the validity of the data, this research applied investigator triangulation. Data collection interviews were collected by two different researchers and another researcher was responsible for data analysis. Transcripts were reviewed by different researchers to ensure consistency in terms of questions asked by the interviewers and to make sure that data were correctly interpreted by the appointed researcher. Thematic analysis was employed in analysing the interview transcripts based on the research questions. The recorded interviews were transcribed into text and data analysis was first conducted by familiarization of data followed by a coding process using an inductive coding approach to generate possible codes from each transcript. Similar codes were then grouped into relevant categories and finally, more meaningful themes were established after revising the codes and code groups multiple times. The findings of the research are presented in the following section following the order of the research questions.

**Table 1.** Participants' Background

NO	PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND	INSTITUTION	CODE
1	Female, Club, and Society Leader.	Universiti Malaysia Kelantan	S1
2	Male, Club, and Society Leader	Universiti Malaysia Kelantan	S2
3	Female, Club and Society Leader	Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia	S3
4	Male, Student Leader	Multimedia University	S4
5	Female, Club and Society Leader	Multimedia University	S5
6	Female, Club and Society Leader	Multimedia University	S6
7	Female, Student Leader	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin	S7
8	Female, Student Leader	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin	S8
9	Female, Student Leader	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin	S9
10	Female, Student Leader	Multimedia University	S10
11	Male, Student Leader	International Islamic University Malaysia	S11
12	Male, Student Leader	International Islamic University Malaysia	S12
13	Male, Club, and Society Leader	International Islamic University Malaysia	S13
14	Female, Student Leader	Multimedia University	S14

## 6. Findings

To understand the student leaders' perspectives on online co-curricular activities, a few probing questions were designed as guidance to the interviewer and included in the interview protocol document. The semi-structured interviews being asked were:

- i. Could you tell us about your experience participating in co-curricular activities in online mode during the pandemic?
- ii. What have you learned from your experience when participating in online co-curricular activities?

The findings from this research will be presented from two different perspectives which are the challenges that the students faced and the benefits that they gained from their experiences.

## **6.1. Challenges**

All the respondents shared similar challenges, which were related to the technology such as internet connection, lack of ideas for programs or activities that could be conducted online, knowledge of the platforms available, and technological expertise in conducting the programs virtually. The challenges faced by the student leaders were categorized under technology, lack of innovation, low participation and preparedness,

### **6.1.1. Technology**

Technology plays a significant role in allowing students to participate in co-curricular activities especially when they were being forced to be physically separated during the pandemic. Technology that acts as the platforms to conduct the activities were mentioned in the transcripts such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and YouTube. The technology theme was derived from the transcripts during the analysis of the interview transcripts by identifying any sentences and paragraphs that contained an explanation about technology or related to the application of the technology with negative indicators. For example, paragraphs or sentences containing keywords like "always disconnected", "problems with platforms", "technical issues" and "lagging" will be categorised under the technology theme. As a result, it can be concluded that technology is one of the greatest obstacles, as indicated by the respondents below:

"One of the biggest challenges is the internet connection. It is because when you have your online program then the internet will suddenly go down and disconnect" (S9)

"Sometimes it's more like technical issues like lagging and internet problems" (S4)

"Okay on time I can say all our preparations are all very smooth but on the actual event our community is like disconnected you know" (S10)

"I think like you know, the problem is that since we have different what we called it, setups, different setup, different rates, different computers then different capabilities of using online then I think we're not ready for online platform yet" (S12)

### **6.1.2. Lack of Innovation**

Due to the lack of experience managing and organising online events and activities, the student leaders feel that they lack innovation. They have limited ideas on how to conduct the events and activities, and how to make the events and activities interesting to attract other students' participation. This theme was developed using the codes that appeared in the interview transcripts whenever the researcher discovered sentences or paragraphs with pertinent keywords that had negative connotations such as "lack of ideas", "challenge", "difficult to manage" etc. Below are some of the quotations derived from the interview transcripts.

"I have participated in quite several online events as well, and the one I want to say is like for me now, because I was the director of 30 Hours Famine last year. So, I have a lot of experience in that. The challenge I face is that lack of ideas. Because this is the first virtual event, I will organise. And we cannot use the old ways anymore". (S6)

"We were facing a lot of challenges for example if we organise a program, we include group activities. However, in the online program, that element is not there since it is difficult to manage" (S2)

### **6.1.3. Low Participation**

Participation in this study context can be explained by the number of students who participated in an event or activity as well as the student's participation and engagement during the online events and activities. It may include the students' responses and attention span that require high focus during an online event and activities. The low participation theme is associated with codes that emerged in interview transcripts with negative connotations such as "difficult to focus", "one-way communication", "inactive", "not paying attention" and "not disciplined". The student leaders found that it is difficult to attract students to participate and stay longer in online events and activities. Some students did not focus even though they were online. The following quotations are some of the indicators of the challenges in online co-curricular events and activities concerning low participation:

"Okay, so basically, throughout the entire COVID season, everything was online or virtual. Personally, for me, that was the interaction. When I say interaction is we when you compare it to physical times, it was more towards like a two-way session, two-way communication to the recommendation. But in Google Meet, mostly, from what I've seen in experience, it's basically like one-way communication." (S2)

"It is hard to bond each other committee when as compared to a physical event." (S6)

"The most challenge I think the most challenging part is that we need to contribute to each other we need to engage each other to make sure the objective of the program is achieved. (S1)

"And the second challenge, I would say, is the participation rate from the students themselves. Because when we transition to online, I think you'll also notice that there's a lot of students who become

inactive, they tend to just sometimes go missing, or they just purely focused on, you know, their studies, because, of course, the pandemic transition hasn't been, it has been quite difficult on some people as well. So to get the participation rate for events has been one of the challenges as well". (S14)

"We cannot discipline ourselves to focus to make sure that we pay attention to every single thing delivered by the speaker in terms of content" (S1)

#### **6.1.4. Preparedness**

Organising activities and events for students require multiple skills including management, planning, and technical skills. Shifting from physical to online platforms was made mandatory during the pandemic without having an opportunity to prepare especially in terms of technical skills. The student leaders highlighted that during the pandemic, one of the biggest challenges is their preparation to adopt technology to execute their events and activities. The codes derived from the interview transcripts such as "need all the knowledge", "familiarization", "unexpected" and "unplanned". The following quotations are the evidence from the interview transcripts related to the lack of preparation in handling online co-curricular events and activities:

"I would say the first challenge would be technical knowledge. Because when we first started in the pandemic, of course, we were always used to physical events, right? So, transitioning from that physical to virtual, needing to have all the knowledge, for example, conducting live streams, and so on. That was something quite challenging for myself, and also the team that I've been working with. So that's one challenge." (S14)

"We have a problem in terms of familiarizing ourselves with the virtual environment which is different from the previous physical situation" (S1)

"All we need to understand is sometimes the participant is not as what we expect all" (S3)

"But if the problem comes during the program that is unplanned, so we can't do anything, we can just wait" (S7)

#### **6.2. Benefits**

Despite the difficulties encountered during the interview with the selected participants, online co-curricular activities have come with several advantages in the eyes of the student leaders including accessibility, improvement in digital skills, and promoting creativity. The themes under the benefits category were developed based on the codes identified in the interview transcripts that have positive tone or indicators such as "benefit", "increasing", "advantage", "gained", "more", "higher" and "better". Paragraphs or sentences that contains these keywords were analysed and grouped under the three main themes as presented below:



### **6.2.1. Accessibility**

Online activities are more accessible to students due to their limitations in terms of transportation, time, and geographical location. Because of the ubiquity nature of information and communication technology, more students can participate and access the materials provided by the organisers, as well as access the full recording of the event after it has concluded. The recording feature allows students who couldn't be there to watch it later or use it as a reference after the event. The following are some of the quotes taken from the interview transcripts:

“And then sometimes, it's clearer when they are in online, there's also like, it's being recorded and so forth. So, it's easier to access at any time” (S4)

“One of my friends prefers online activities instead of physical ones, because they can record the events, the session, and also because when she likes it because she can participate in many events” (S12)

“I saw the rate or the statistics of participants, it's increasing because it's online, so they can be wherever they want, it is accessible from just through via their smartphone or whatever smart gadget with proper Wi-Fi. So the participation rate is quite higher online” (S4)

“But for online, what we call it the advantage is more towards the viewer is because we were able to get many viewers that wanted to participate but could not come. So more on the viewers and our wide range of people that were able to join” (S13)

### **6.2.2. Improve digital skills.**

Despite of experiencing digital challenges, some participants claimed that they learned a lot of digital skills by participating in and organising online activities and events. Digital skills include the ability to use online tools provided by online service providers like Google and Microsoft Teams as well as the ability to administer online meeting and event platforms. These were mentioned by the participants and noted during the interview process as quoted below:

I have gained a lot of knowledge with online activities, including technical and soft skills like using Google Slides, jam board, online polls, and other tools. Along with that, I discovered how to properly use Google Docs and Excel, which are supposedly accessible tools that I was previously unaware of. But eventually, after participating in numerous events and other activities, the presenter taught us how to use it this time around properly. Learning that is a very excellent thing because it is highly beneficial. (S4)

“Because of the technology, we can use many other tools when we organised the online programme, and learned about something new too” (S14)

“I is still learning and then I've discovered a lot of things new how to live stream how to what we call it how to help someone else's computer from where you are, those are the skills that I learned and developed” (S11)

### **6.2.3. Promoting creativity.**

Organising virtual events require a lot of creativity to attract and retain participants for long hours. It pushed the students to have the ability to combine a variety of approaches in organising it, such as the use of visuals, e-games, online quizzes, etc. which promote creativity. The following quotes are some of the responses obtained from the interview transcripts:

“In terms of virtual event, yes, we can gain more we can become more innovative, and we can generate more new ideas”. (S6)

“To get people to join a virtual event, you need to make it interesting enough. To do this, you need to come up with some new ideas” (S5)

“During our Freshies Day, we actually combine many approaches to make sure the programme was fun and yes, it was fun and among the most memorable programme that I had ever organised.” (S14)

## **7. Conclusion**

The results of the interviews conducted with student leaders from different Malaysian institutions can be used by higher education institutions as a guide for creating a framework for more effective online co-curricular activities. The issues related to technology such as technical difficulties, lack of knowledge in handling technology related to online event platforms, digital skills of the students, and relevant parties are the important areas that need to be addressed by the universities. Student leaders who are normally part of the organising committee of the event should be trained in the relevant skills and knowledge to enable them to organise events and activities and at the same time share the skills and knowledge with other participants and relevant parties. Universities can develop digital skills modules for student leaders to improve their skills and knowledge.

At the same time, innovativeness, and preparedness of the organising committee will be able to attract more participants to join the activities. Student leaders should be trained with the required skills too to ensure that they can attract more students to participate. Otherwise, it will be difficult for other students to enjoy the benefits of the online co-curricular activities and gain the knowledge and skills from the activities. Other than creativity in designing the activities, promotion, and awareness of the importance of co-curricular activities should be shared among online students so that they are willing to participate and be actively involved in the activities planned for them. It is challenging to maintain participants' focus on online environments, therefore more skills need to be applied while organising the activities.

It is a collective effort involving different parts of the universities such as the university management in providing relevant support in terms of finances for example to own certain technology either software, hardware, or connectivity for this purpose. The departments in charge of student development should prepare a plan on how the co-curricular activities can be promoted to all students especially those who opted for online mode so that the online students will have fair opportunities to improve their skills such as leadership, decision making, communication and other relevant skills that contribute to their employability in the job market.

In conclusion, in terms of student development, higher education institutions must become more adaptable and well-prepared in light of the pandemic experience. Transformation in teaching and learning modes accepted by students should motivate a shift in the style of organising co-curricular activities, so that not only students enrolled in the face-to-face mode of learning can benefit from them, but also students enrolled in the online mode. Recognizing the importance of co-curricular activities in providing students with additional skills, the relevant parties should take proactive measures to ensure that this area of university development adapts to the current needs and demands. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, more extensive research should be conducted in the future so that a stronger framework for student development can be established, which will ultimately benefit both the institution of higher learning and the students.

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