



Assessing the Impact of University Ambassador Program Through Social Innovation for Rural Community Development in Malaysia

Jalaluddin Abdul Malek*

The National University of Malaysia,
Bangi, Malaysia

Zurinah Tahir

The National University of Malaysia,
Bangi, Malaysia

Nurhazliyana Hanafi

University of Malaysia Terengganu,
Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

Rabeah Adawiyah Baharudin

The National University of Malaysia,
Bangi, Malaysia

Abstract: Social innovation is a driver for change and a solution for social challenges. Literature review shows the difficulties in defining, identifying, and measuring social innovation, especially in rural community development. However, given the emerging social innovation in rural communities, this article aims to measure social innovation based on the University Ambassador Program (UAP). This program is one of the successful programs under the National Transformation and Blue Ocean Strategy. The program aims to improve people's living standards through several useful programs. Qualitative methods are used in this study, i.e., in-depth interviews, whether face-to-face or over the phone. 20 respondents had been interviewed. The study of self-impact and university ambassadors' contribution to village transformation was analyzed using SWOT. It involves youths elected from among rural university students with the characteristics of student leaders who are concerned with the local community. The findings are obtained by interviewing 20 respondents involved with UAP in depth. SWOT analysis is used to identify the impact of university ambassadors in social innovation on the development of rural communities in Malaysia. Social innovation is an approach to meet the community's needs by creating new methods, products, services, and means. The context of social innovation assessment is through the three main education, economy, and social elements. The findings show that UAP needs to be strengthened in the context of the skills and knowledge of ambassadors or students in delivering information to rural communities to benefit effectively.

Keywords: *Social innovation, rural community, UAP, SWOT analysis*

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INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Government has implemented various approaches to developing urban and rural areas to achieve the goal and status of a high-income developed country by 2020. The National Strategy of National Transformation and Blue Ocean Strategy introduced in 2010 has spurred a change in rural development both from the established policy point of view and strategies and initiatives designed specifically to make the rural development effort inclusive and comprehensive. UAP is one of the programs under the NBOS. The UAP is an effort to highlight students as icons and connectors between the urban and rural population. The two-pronged program provides a platform for university students to contribute in the form of energy and knowledge to the rural community as well as to provide opportunities

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed Jalaludin Abdul Malek, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia. E-mail: jbam@ukm.edu.my

and support to the rural community to explore more broadly the socio-economic and education that can be used to improve living standards and income. This innovative program is conducted to meet the needs of rural people who are usually associated with educational, economic and social issues.

In this article the approach of social innovation is used to understand the change especially in social relations involving students, community governance and institutional capacity (Gibson, Graham, & Roelvink, 2013; Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & Gonzalez, 2005) and social innovation as a societal process. It is important for Higher Education Institutions to differentiate their students' level of knowledge and soft skills so that strategies and interventions are implemented to rectify their capabilities (Ahmad, Ali, & Sulaiman, 2018; Keong, Yip, Swee, Toh, & Tai, 2017; Kanduri & Suripeddi, 2018). Empowerment agents and institutions are very important because social innovation is concerned about the collaboration to think, design, develop and strategize in other to achieve what has been planned (Klein, Fontan, Harrisson, & Levesque, 2013). In this context, agents are students and villagers, while institutions are the government, university and village committees.

UNIVERSITY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

University contribution to the community have been discussed since the 1980s. Among them is the Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) established in 1982 featuring university contributions that enable community development including providing facilities, and providing services to them by analyzing their needs, problems and offering new solutions. (Paul & Jorge, 2015). Paul and Jorge (2015) identified six major roles of the university in the process of social innovation (Table 1). One of them is the knowledge bridge that involves students in particular.

Table 1 *A Typology of How Universities Might Be Able to Contribute to Social Innovation*

Support Provided	Role Name	Contribution
Knowledge	Knowledge provider	The university provides existing knowledge or creates new knowledge which informs the development of a solution.
	Knowledge bridge	The university works with a social partner to co-create new knowledge which contributes to a social innovation.
Material resources	Financier	The university invests in activities which contribute to testing or up scaling SI activities and delivering innovative services.
	Landlord	The university makes its facilities available during the SI process, including offices, libraries, and laboratories.
Know how and know- who	Advisor	The university provides advice to social innovators on how best to access external knowledge resources/who might be able to help them
	Mentor	The university helps to persuade third parties of the value of the SI and for them to adopt or invest their own resources in social innovation.

Source: (Paul & Jorge, 2015)

Social innovation involves actors and processes. The initial concept and definition of social innovation is described as a result of innovation that is primarily aimed at achieving social needs and is dominated by social organizations (Mulgan, 2006). In addition, Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller (2008) defined social innovation as a new solution that brings significant value to solving community problems. However, it specifically focuses on adding value to social aspects of society rather than economic and commercial value. It shows the early concepts of social innovation as highly associated with a social term, known as "pure social innovation" (Pol & Ville, 2009). The definition of social innovation is seen as an old paradigm and is centered in the field of basic and sociological publications in literature (Klein, Tremblay, & Bussi eres, 2010). However, today's knowledge of the definition of social innovation also means the economy, as the significant value of social innovation may be brought forward to contribute towards improving the

quality and quantity of people's lives, stimulating economic growth and advancing technological advances (Jali, Abas, & Ariffin, 2017). Thus, social innovation is not necessarily bound to overcome certain social intentions but significant values include various types of innovative outcomes that include social, economic and technological aspects (Unceta, Castro-Spila, & Garcia Fronti, 2016).

BEPA 2010, chose social innovation in empowering human change for three main reasons. First, it is due to community pressure, community demand and community change. This situation is influenced by rapid technological change, migration, unemployment, poverty (increasing number of children and young people living in poverty), social isolation, ageing and better-off population (disease-obesity, stress, and climate change. Second, new responses are needed during key budget constraints such as financial crisis and economic downturn. Lastly, traditional solutions are often inadequate. These challenges required innovative ways to solving the problem.

UNIVERSITY AMBASSADOR AS LOCAL CHAMPION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY

The University ambassador is one of the programs created to give university students the opportunity to contribute in the form of energy and knowledge owned to develop the countryside. Ambassadors are able to create progressive communications to receive and deliver essential information. According to Jennings Mel (2003), ambassador is a community volunteer who has the responsibility of disseminating information and delivering views and aspirations to the target community. They also have high confidence and willingly help others in any way they can. An ambassador is someone who can work with a group of different people professionally and should also be willing to do whatever they ask for (Ylonen, 2012).

In this context, the university ambassador is considered a local champion. This is because university ambassadors are selected from rural students studying at universities and they act as an icon of the rural society to be a liaison and communicator of information to rural communities. They also have the characteristics of student leaders who are concerned with the local community (Gartland, 2015). According to Nickson and Henriksen (2013), the role of the ambassador is invaluable in helping students have a sense of belonging, personal growth, and mentoring.

There are various UAP that serve as the local champion in rural development. As an example the Rural Youth Ambassador Program or University Ambassador was launched in 2011 by the Australian Minister of Higher Education and Skills at the Rural Country Education Project. The UAP or the US ambassador in the United States is a community-shaped volunteer concept. One of the universities running the UAP is the University of South Carolina. The program was first implemented in 1994. In the United Kingdom, it is part of a university/college student representative. Students will engage with new students and their families by providing useful information about life and experience throughout the university/college.

In Malaysia, the UAP under NBOS 4 is headed by the Ministry of Higher Education as a lead agency and utilized by various ministries and agencies. The Ambassador of the University is selected from among the local university students from the area around the RT. This program provides university students the opportunity to contribute in the form of energy and knowledge to develop rural areas. Various activities are organized and implemented involving University Ambassadors including programs planned by the Ministry and other agencies. The UAP utilizes today's technology for the purpose of communicating with the community. This effort is seen to be able to assist KPTs to identify issues and challenges of rural communities as well as assist the Government in providing information on existing facilities and listening to problems faced by rural communities.

The five major functions of the university ambassador are: i. Youth leaders are mainly in the aspect of association ii. Liaison between local communities and government agencies in the aspect of information delivery such as loan facilities and other assistance provided by the Government iii. Experts refer to the local community on current issues related to social, educational, economic, technological and political as well iv. Supporters and mobilizers of local community activities either develop new projects or use existing Government-provided facilities and v. A source of inspiration and example among youth by showing mature, positive and confident characters. The program that has been identified for the success of the UAP is an ambitious idea of the ambassador itself and improved through discussions with various relevant agencies. Eight programs that have been organized are as follows:

C-Ways

To begin with, the program helps entrepreneurs to market their products. This involves assistance in terms of product packaging, resourcing and relocation of the pumpkin to penetrate a wider market. It involves university

ambassadors from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and is held around Sayong, Kuala Kangsar, Perak. Among the ministries and agencies involved are MARA, MOA (TEKUN), Malaysian Cooperative Council (MKM), Cooperative Commission of Malaysia (SKM), SIFE Malaysia and Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (MoTour).

ICT Village

In this program the university ambassador will help to expose ICT skills to the locals by using the facilities available at the Community Broadband Center and Village Info Field. To date the program involves university ambassadors from Universiti Sains Malaysia. The location selected is Felda Besout 2, Perak and the program is held in collaboration with the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the Department of Polytechnic Studies, FELDA, and the Women's Association of Associations (GPW).

Smartors

This program involves the involvement of university ambassadors with excellent teachers to foster and enhance interest in mathematical and science subjects among schoolchildren. UiTM students have been selected as university ambassadors for this program. The pilot program was held in Sekolah Kebangsaan Trolak Utara, Perak with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education.

Mobile Students

In this program the university ambassador will use the mobile library to convey knowledge to the local community by focusing on niche areas for the area. The program involving university ambassadors from the International Islamic University was held in collaboration with the National Library of Malaysia and the Perak State Public Library Corporation.

ME UniInterns

This program is triggered to help micro entrepreneurs improve their business performance using UniInterns SME model from SME Corps. University ambassadors from USIM have partnered with representatives of SME Corp, MASMED-UiTM and KKLW agencies to assist small entrepreneurs with the skills required to highlight their product potential. The pilot program for ME UniInterns was held around Gopeng with traditional cake products and frozen foods.

iParents

The program involves the collaboration of university ambassadors with outstanding teachers to help parents who have weak children in science and mathematics subjects. The university ambassadors from UPSI together with the Ministry of Education (Malaysia) (MOE) have carried out a program involving interesting activities for school students in Felda Besout 1. The implementation of interesting science and mathematics activities is an effort to inculcate the interest of school students to be more interested in science and mathematics.

Educate Malaysia

The program is targeted at the younger generation in rural areas aimed at strengthening character and identity through knowledge, motivation and leadership. The university ambassador will act as a facilitator and mentor to share information such as learning techniques, educational opportunities and careers. It also aims to educate young people to prepare for challenges and the main obstacles to success. The program also involves cooperation from various agencies such as UPSI with motivation from the Ministry of Health Malaysia for the filing of health and the Malaysian Armed Forces for the promotion of discipline and survival.

Health for Malaysia

The program aims to create awareness through the importance of maintaining health to ensure that rural populations are free from health problems and adopt a healthy lifestyle. This activity involves health screening and awareness campaigns. The university ambassador for the program consists of medical, dental and pharmacy students. It involves the involvement of external agencies such as the State Health Department, the Malaysian Armed Forces and the KKLW.

Implementation of this program is based on target groups in rural areas such as primary school students, secondary schools, students with problems in particular subjects and residents. The involvement of these students as university

ambassadors not only has a positive effect on the society and nation but also train those students through the experience gained in carrying out their duties as Ambassadors. Hence, this article will discuss the impact of UAP on rural development through social innovation elements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods are used in this study, i.e., in-depth interviews whether face-to-face or over the phone. This method can give a clear picture of UAP and their role when involved in the program. Various programs have been carried out covering 3 main areas - education, economy, and social. There were 20 respondents who had been interviewed i.e., 4 in the north zone, 12 in the eastern zone, and 4 in the south zone. The study of self-impact and university ambassadors contribution to village transformation was analyzed using SWOT. The main utility of SWOT analysis is to help build strength, minimize weaknesses, seize opportunities, and overcome threats (Leiber, Stensaker, & Harvey, 2018).

RESULTS

The SWOT analysis method was used in evaluating the impact of the UAP through social innovation in rural development. SWOT analysis is carried out on the DU program through the elements of social innovation involved. This study focuses on 3 main elements that involve community development namely education, economy and social. UAP is an initiative to balance out the development of the three elements in rural development.

Education

Strengths: In the context of education, the presence of the university ambassador has a positive impact on the community through the services offered such as online tuition. It is an innovation in the field of education because students can access the latest materials that are provided on a recurring basis and in their own time. Online tuition helps students who will face PT3, SPM, and STPM exams. The University ambassador - is the source of inspiration for students with outstanding achievement in exams before entering university. Additionally, university ambassadors are able to provide energy to teach basic skills to rural communities according to their expertise. For example, teach how to repair electrical goods;

Weaknesses: The knowledge level of university ambassadors on technology should be in line with the knowledge of many exposed students with the latest technology; and university ambassadors are less capable of handling a large number of students

Opportunities: The university ambassador can attract primary and secondary school students to university entry, and the DU has been using existing skills to assist rural communities

Threats: Rural students do not have computers and internet connections for access to online tuition; and Students are less aware of DU information that is not accompanied by a realistic example.

Economy

Economists estimate that between 50 and 80 percent of economic growth comes from innovation and new knowledge (Mulgan, 2006).

Strengths: The power of the UAP helps rural entrepreneurs in generating income by increasing the productivity of a product they produce. UA also helps to promote the products of the villagers through the website; DU can improve and enhance their skills and experience in several ways. Firstly, the entrepreneurial skills talent amongst the villagers, especially the youth, was conducted through the activities. DU is an agent of change and intermediaries in the implementation of social innovation since the DU is able to provide exposure and knowledge related to production techniques, product generation and product branding as well as product marketing to rural people;

Weaknesses: To implement programs that meet the needs of the community, there are also weaknesses that need to be acknowledged. The DU's effort ceases after the expiry date of the appointment and the entrepreneur does not resume advertising through the internet made by the DU. The implementation of the DU economic program with the community is not continuously held, resulting in difficult ongoing monitoring and training for the rural population. DU is less skilled with economic activities conducted in the village. The program is also not implemented thoroughly;

Opportunities: The economic opportunity in the implementation of social innovation through the UAP is increasing the sales of the population. DU's ability to advertise village products through advertising on the internet and building its own website specifically for village resident products. DU can attract young people when current ad technologies

Table 2 SWOT Analysis in Terms of Education

Education	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out online tuition for the rural community; • DU as a role model for students • DU teaches basic skills in line with their expertise and field of DU studies at universities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The knowledge level of DU on technology should be in line with the knowledge of many exposed students with the latest technology; • DU is less capable of handling a large number of students.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DU can attract primary and secondary school students to university entry; and • DU has been using existing skills to assist rural communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural students do not have computers and internet connections for access to online tuition; and • Students are less aware of DU information that is not accompanied by a realistic example

are exposed to them. Communities receive good DU assistance in diversifying product marketing techniques; and **Threats:** The seasonal UAP is contributing to the level of economic sustainability itself. Product marketing goes back to conventional methods after the absence of DU. DU faces difficulty in ensuring the rural community is concerned about the potential of existing resources to diversify the economic activities of the population. The biggest threat is when the program improvement requirements are limited.

Table 3 SWOT Analysis in Terms of Economy

Economy	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DU helps to improve productivity of a product and helps to locate people based on the products produced; • DU helps promote the products of the villagers through the website; • DU manages to unleash entrepreneurial skills talent among villagers especially youths; • DU provides exposure and knowledge related to production techniques, product generation and product branding as well as product marketing to rural people; • Increasing skills and experiences especially to entrepreneurs; and • Government change and mediation agent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The DU's effort ceases after the expiry date of the appointment and the entrepreneur does not proceed with the advertisement of the product through the internet made by the DU; • The DU economic program with the community is not continuously held which causes ongoing monitoring and training to rural people difficult; • Implemented programs are uncompleted; and • University Ambassadors lack of skills in economic activities conducted in the village.

Table 3 *Continued...*

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DU helps increase product sales through advertisements on the internet and build their own website specifically for products of villagers; • Communities receive both DU's assistance in diversifying product marketing techniques; and • Attracts young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product marketing returns to conventional methods after the absence of the DU; • DU's difficulty in convincing the rural community of potentially existing resources to diversify the economic activity of the population; and • Limited program improvement requirements.

Social

Strengths: Social factors are an important part of the UAP program's evaluation of rural development through social innovation. The DU program is capable of strengthening the community's social development. The DU successfully attracts rural people to the importance of healthcare. DU's advice on healthcare creates awareness among rural communities. The UAP program as an intermediary for the Society receives clearer information. Collaboration with various parties can be enhanced through the implementation of this program.

Weaknesses: However, the likelihood of DU's level of knowledge on all health matters is inadequate during the presentation to the rural people. The disadvantage of this program is the lack of co-operation from well-known and professional bodies. One of the factors is that the program information is unwarranted. Furthermore, there is limited activity

Opportunities: The impact assessment of social development is the opportunity of DU as the main agent to encourage rural communities to adopt a healthy lifestyle. This program can improve DU self-personalities as well as local communities. DU is an informational distributor through social media

Threats: Social threats in the implementation of this program are misleading information. Residents rely entirely on DU information without researching themselves against any illness. The question arises of the credibility of the University Ambassadors in social development. Selecting the appropriate program in developing the social role of the local population.

Table 4 *SWOT Analysis in Terms of Social Factors*

Strengths	Economy
	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DU succeeds in attracting rural people towards the importance of healthcare; • DU's advice on healthcare raises awareness among rural communities; • The public receives clearer information; and • Improves the cooperation of various parties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DU's level of knowledge on all possible health issues that are less accurate during delivery to the rural community; • Lack of collaboration with professional and reputable bodies; and • Limited and restricted activity periods.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DU as a primary agent encourages rural communities to adopt a healthy lifestyle; • Improves personality character; and • Information relay agent through social media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents rely entirely on DU information without making any self-research on a disease; • University Ambassador's credibility; and • Program selection.

Based on the study, it is found that the UAP has its own strengths in the success of rural transformation initiatives. This is because the main approach practiced in this program through communication gives DU the opportunity to convey information and at the same time, to gather feedback from the target groups on the needs of rural communities in the ongoing transformation process.

The effectiveness of bilateral relations and communication between university ambassador and rural communities can transform and reinforce the new behavior of rural communities and it is a method in the process of social innovation. However, the results of the SWOT analysis through this study also found that there are some improvements that need to be addressed to ensure that the DU program is still relevant by emphasizing the element of great impact on the people, low costs, quick execution and sustainability. SWOT analysis conducted on this program can contribute to the implementation of strategic planning to improve the DU program in the future. Through this analysis, all aspects of social innovation including, education, economics and social have been assessed in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Among the weaknesses identified are the selection of non-skilled university ambassadors to become facilitators, the level of knowledge of technology that is still low and less capability in controlling the number of program participants. There is also a host of programs implemented overlapping with the university ambassadors learning schedule, so university ambassador cannot directly and actively participate in the program. The program implemented by university ambassadors has no continuity after the contract expires; for example, there are operators who did not continue advertising via the internet made by the university ambassador when the university ambassador no longer around. In addition, the programs implemented by the university ambassadors are less impactful due to the lack of collaboration with professional and prominent bodies.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, a program of social-oriented approach towards attitude change will not show the result in a short period of time. The success of the proposed strategy and proposal depends on the readiness, participation and involvement of rural communities. This is because the social innovation program implemented requires close collaboration from various government agencies and private sector and villagers. If not received by the villagers, it will frustrate the efforts made by the government to improve the living standards of the locals. Despite the constraints at the university ambassador level itself, it can be fully utilized by taking into account existing strengths and limitations. Program deployment and monitoring at the top level is also one of the factors contributing to the success and effectiveness of the social innovation program that has been outlined. In that regard, all parties need to be committed to implementing the social-based programs. Social innovation has become even more important in recent times. This is partly because some of the barriers to the community development, social and economic growth such as climate change, youth unemployment, aging populations, and increased social conflicts can be overcome only with the help of social innovation.

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