

SEA-VET.NET - GOOD PRACTICE

SULAM Walkabout

Service Learning in Micropreneurship

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OVERVIEW

Implementing institution(s)	Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-sultan Abdullah
Country and / or localities where practice has been implemented	Pekan and Gambang, Pahang Malaysia
Timeline (first year of implementation - last year of implementation)	2023 - ongoing
Target group	Engineering students enrolled in 'Leadership in the World of Work' Course and TVET micropreneurs (Car repair and services)
Total cost incurred / Resources required	MYR 2000

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia introduced Service Learning Malaysia – University of Society (SULAM) in 2019 where academic learning is integrated into the community, with the hope to foster a symbiotic relationship between students, universities, and communities, promoting the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders within the community for education and societal development.

THE PRACTICE

Context

Under the National TVET Policy 2030, Malaysia encourages graduates to seek opportunities as job creators other than job seekers as a pathway to reduce unemployment. A TVET graduate tracer study conducted in 2020 revealed that the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD) produced the highest number of entrepreneurs with 44.6% earning incomes below RM1000 from automotive repair and service workshops. There is also a stereotypical 3D (Dangerous, Demeaning, Difficult) perception of some TVET jobs including self-employment, exacerbated by the disparity between entrepreneurial activity and income generation.

Aims

The SULAM walkabout project embedded in the 'Leadership in the World of Work' course at UMPA aims to provide students with a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the world of work and to instil self-belief among university students to set up their own business. Offering students direct exposure to the realities of micropreneurship within the automotive industry, particularly among small-scale and self-employed workshop operators, this experiential engagement is hoped to equip students with practical knowledge in the socio-economic realities, operational challenges, and sustainability strategies of micro entrepreneurship to be able to navigate the unique dynamics of self-employment in the future.

Implementation of the Practice

The walkabout project integrated into SULAM is designed, particularly within the automotive industry. This hands-on learning experience allows students to gain practical insights into the realities, challenges, and opportunities of self-employment and micropreneurship.

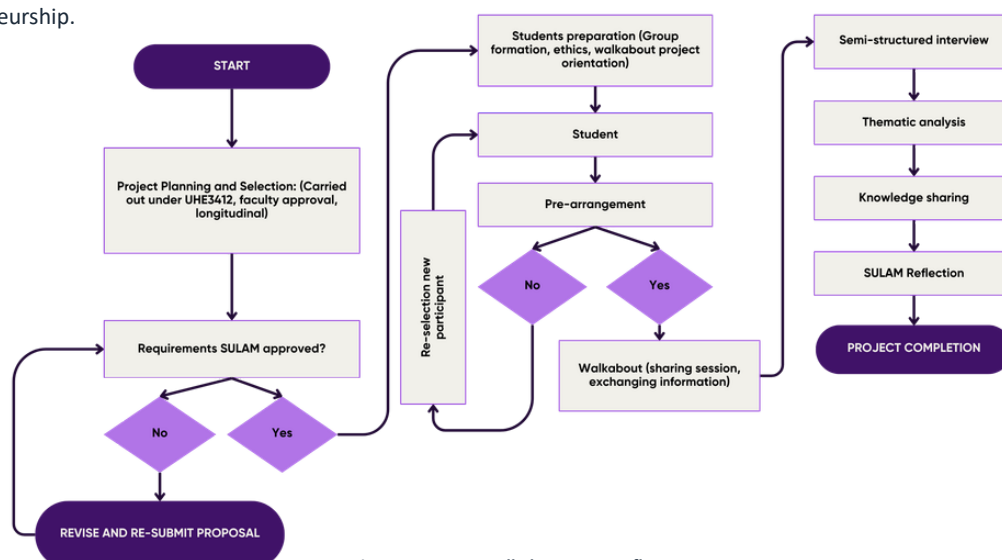


Figure 1 SULAM Walkabout Process flow

A total of four groups visited twelve business entities in Pekan and Kuantan, Pahang engaging with micropreneurs operating car repair and service workshops.

Before the field engagement, students were introduced to ethical guidelines and professional conduct to ensure appropriate interactions with micropreneurs during the walkabout sessions. Informed consent forms were provided to micropreneurs, detailing the objectives of the project, interview procedures, and the principles of voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. These ethical measures ensured that participants were fully aware of the purpose, procedures, and potential use of the information gathered. Participation was entirely voluntary.

The participants involved in this walkabout project were selected based on several characteristics that reflected the contextual realities of micro-entrepreneurial within the automotive service sector.

- Operated as small-scale automotive-related businesses
- Located in Kuantan and Pekan, Pahang
- Possessed more than five years of business operation experience
- Earned a monthly income below RM1000
- Functioned as car workshop micropreneurs undertaking multiple responsibilities within a one-person operation setting



Figure 2 Home based car repair and services workshop

Students were assigned to work collaboratively in groups to reach out to micropreneurs who fulfilled the predetermined selection criteria. Before the walkabout session, the students established preliminary communication and made pre-arrangements with the respective micropreneurs in order to clarify the project's goals, the purpose of the walkabout activity, how students are involved, and what ethical procedures are followed.

During the walkabout sessions, students interacted directly with micropreneurs through informal interactions and professional discussions. They shared insights from the Leadership in the World of Work course, focusing on topics such as leadership in TVET, self-employment, entrepreneurial sustainability, and the transition from job seekers to job creators. This engagement also fostered reciprocal knowledge exchange, where micropreneurs shared their lived experiences, business realities, leadership practices, survival strategies, and challenges in sustaining small-scale automotive businesses.

After the engagement, semi-structured interviews were conducted by students under the guidance of instructors. This approach provided flexibility to explore emerging issues and contextual experiences shared by the micropreneurs while staying aligned with the project's objectives. Each session, lasting approximately two hours, allowed time for observation, interaction, reflection, and data collection within the authentic workplace environment.

Following the sessions, students analyzed and discussed their findings collaboratively with instructors through reflective and guided learning sessions.

IMPACT

The walkabout provided students with direct exposure to the lived realities of micropreneurs, reshaping their perception of engineering career pathways. Rather than viewing salaried employment as the only viable option, many students began to recognise self-employment and entrepreneurship as legitimate career choices.

They gained awareness of entrepreneurial resilience and the socio-economic challenges of sustaining small businesses. Students gained real world leadership and empathy as they discussed sustainability challenges faced by the micropreneurs including manpower shortages, technological adaptation, financial constraints.

The engagement revealed financial barriers confronting aspiring TVET entrepreneurs. High start-up and operating costs—including equipment, workshop rental, maintenance, and marketing—combined with the persistent perception of automotive work as a 3D (Dangerous, Difficult, and Demeaning) occupation, continue to discourage entry into self-employment.

On the other hand, the automotive micropreneurs learn that they must enhance their technical competencies in vehicle diagnostics, electronic systems, and emerging automotive technologies to stay competitive and sustainable in the modern automotive industry of electronic and hybrid vehicles.

As a result of the project, the findings were discussed during classroom reflection sessions and knowledge-sharing engagements with all twelve participating micropreneurs. Students and instructors collaboratively proposed practical recommendations focused on modernization strategies, adaptation to technological trends, entrepreneurial resilience, branding approaches, and the repositioning of TVET-related occupations as sustainable career pathways. For example, students and micropreneurs discussed requisite skills required such as diagnostic and repair for hybrid and electric vehicle, scanning and sensor based fault detection, basic digital marketing or financial management.

Building upon these, an extended phase of the project has been planned in collaboration with the Faculty of Mechanical and Automotive Engineering Technology, through which participating micropreneurs will undergo structured automotive engineering courses covering these advanced-technology areas, which will extend technical mentorship, joint upskilling workshops, and industry networking beyond the original twelve participating workshops. A grant proposal built on this extended collaboration projects that participating micropreneurs' monthly income could rise by 100–150%, from approximately RM2,000 to RM2,500 and above, on the basis that these are essential, community-anchored services that local residents continue to rely on regardless of broader economic conditions.

For students, this translated into direct exposure to how field research and community needs can be developed into a fundable, scalable intervention, reinforcing their view of self-employment and TVET-based entrepreneurship as a viable, adaptive career path rather than a fallback option as the project enhanced students' awareness of the realities of self-employment, the socio-economic struggles faced by micropreneur and the need for adaptive leadership in the world of work.

LESSON LEARNT AND REPLICABILITY

This experience also demonstrated that leadership is best developed through authentic engagement with communities, where students observe resilience, decision-making, and problem-solving in real-world contexts rather than solely through classroom instruction.

Additionally, the value of reciprocal knowledge exchange, as micropreneurs willingly participated as knowledge partners, sharing practical insights while re-establishing connections with the university without incurring consultancy costs. This reinforced the importance of recognising community practitioners as co-educators who contribute valuable experiential knowledge to engineering education while strengthening academia-community collaboration.

The walkabout model can be readily adapted across disciplines by embedding structured reflection sessions that emphasise leadership-in-practice rather than leadership theory alone, enabling students to internalise entrepreneurial mindsets and community-based learning. To maintain relevance and ensure meaningful engagement, future implementations should recruit participants using clearly defined criteria, such as income level, years of operation, and business sector, so that the learning experience remains aligned with the socio-economic issues it seeks to address.

Most importantly, future implementations should continue to position micropreneurs as co-educators rather than research subjects, fostering mutually beneficial university–community partnerships that promote sustainable knowledge exchange and long-term engagement.

As the SULAM walkabout project is structured as a longitudinal initiative, with its initial implementation taking place between 2023 and 2024, and subsequent phases planned to support continuous development and ongoing engagement with industry micropreneurs, the project is also transferable to other TVET domains facing workforce and sustainability challenges, such as welding, tailoring, culinary, and electrical services, for students to explore entrepreneurial realities across sectors. Scalability can be enhanced through collaboration with faculties specializing in automotive technology, entrepreneurship, and business management.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Springing from this research-based SULAM walkabout, there could be broader interdisciplinary and industry collaboration involving automotive entrepreneurs across Malaysia and faculties with technical automotive expertise and business-related competencies. For example, partnerships with automotive technology faculties could translate identified skills gaps into targeted upskilling initiatives on EV maintenance and electronic diagnostics. Faculties specializing in entrepreneurship and business management could contribute knowledge on business sustainability, marketing strategies, financial management, and entrepreneurial development such as competency enhancement programs, technological up Automotive faculties can support technical upskilling for micropreneurs in areas like electronic vehicles, while business faculties can provide expertise in financial literacy, branding, and digital marketing.

CONCLUSION

The SULAM Walkabout implemented at UMPSEA is a case example of 'TVET as a service' where students, enterprises together with education institution coordination, exchange knowledge, skills and mindset to mitigate TVET challenges through 'co-creation' (Cai & Kosaka, 2024).

The service learning walkabout enabled students to gain hands-on, authentic experience in the "World of Work" and develop civic consciousness as they explore and learn to address critical community needs such as entrepreneurial challenges and sustainable self-employment which hopefully can transform institutions into "*places of active learning, connected to people and programs in the community, inviting young people to become excited about the possibilities of helping others while helping themselves at the same time*" (Shumer & Duckenfield, 2004:162).

In the future, the project proposes broader industry-academia collaboration, longitudinal implementation across multiple TVET sectors, and the creation of a structure for community engagement in TVET leadership that integrates experiential learning, entrepreneurship, and sustainable workforce development.

REFERENCES

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT GOOD PRACTICES

“Good Practices” are chosen according to selection criteria that have been created by a working group. They aim to serve as benchmarks for transformation towards quality TVET. However, they reflect on the individual circumstances of the submitting country and may only be adopted with context specific modifications.

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