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Evaluating the Impact of Volunteerism on Character Development Among University Students

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Abstract

Volunteerism plays a significant role in promoting character development among university students by fostering leadership, social responsibility, communication, and interpersonal skills, but due to academic workload, time constraints, lack of motivation, and financial constraints, the level of students' participation in volunteer activities remains relatively low, limiting opportunities for character development. The objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of volunteerism on character development among university students. This quantitative research employed a cross-sectional research design using a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms to 155 university students from public and private universities in Malaysia. The respondents were selected using convenience sampling, while the data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such mean, standard deviation and reliability analysis. The reliability analysis demonstrated excellent internal consistency, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.984. The findings indicate that university students generally demonstrated a high level of character development, with a mean score of 3.395, suggesting that volunteerism positively contributes to the development of leadership, social responsibility, communication, and interpersonal skills. The outcomes of this study are expected to provide greater understanding of the importance of volunteerism in shaping students' character and serve as a reference for universities and policymakers in strengthening volunteer programmes that promote holistic student development.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism is a significant practice that contributes to community building and character development (Pusztai et al., 2021). Volunteerism involves helping others by offering services freely without any expectation. In universities, students can volunteer themselves to contribute to community services and build various personal attributes and social skills. Students can benefit from participating in volunteer activities, gaining useful experience that will increase their knowledge about social matters as well as their sense of accountability towards society. Character development plays a vital role in the process of acquiring higher

education since universities strive to produce individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also have good characters and proper behavior (Estrera, 2024; Zhang & Wu, 2023). Qualities like responsibility, leadership, empathy, discipline, and communication skills are key factors needed for students in the future. The volunteer activities give students a chance to develop these qualities during their involvement in group work and interactions with different people.

While acknowledging the positive effects of volunteering, student engagement in volunteer work is seen to be decreasing due to reasons like academic workload, time constraints, and lack of motivation. This could mean that students do not get a chance to cultivate character. In addition, previous research on the subject of volunteerism has studied its influence on motivation and skills but little has been researched regarding character building (Hoi & Yin, 2023; Johari, 2024). It is against this background that the current study seeks to assess the effects of volunteering on character building.

Although volunteerism has been widely recognised for promoting students' personal growth and social engagement, the level of participation among university students remains relatively low due to factors such as academic commitments, limited time, lack of awareness, and insufficient motivation. This situation may reduce opportunities for students to develop important character attributes, including leadership, social responsibility, communication skills, and self-confidence through meaningful community involvement. Furthermore, existing studies have primarily focused on the influence of volunteerism on students' motivation, employability, and skill development, while comparatively fewer studies have specifically examined its contribution to character development among university students. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the impact of volunteerism on character development among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Volunteerism has become an increasingly important component of higher education, serving as an experiential learning approach that promotes students' personal, social, civic, and moral development. As a voluntary contribution of time, effort, and skills for the benefit of others without financial reward, volunteerism enables university students to engage directly with communities and address real-world social challenges beyond the classroom. Through these experiences, students are able to apply academic knowledge in practical settings while developing a stronger sense of social responsibility, civic engagement, and ethical awareness. Consequently, many higher education institutions have integrated volunteer programmes into their co-curricular activities as a strategy to cultivate graduates who possess not only academic competence but also strong moral values and leadership qualities.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that participation in volunteer activities contributes positively to students' academic engagement, personal growth, and professional development. For instance, volunteer involvement has been found to strengthen students' motivation to persist in higher education and enhance their sense of belonging within the university community (Pusztai et al., 2021). Likewise, volunteer experiences promote the development of essential transferable skills, including communication, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities that are highly valued in both academic and employment contexts (Johari, 2024). More recent studies further suggest that volunteerism extends beyond skill acquisition by nurturing important character attributes such as empathy, compassion, integrity, responsibility, resilience, and ethical behaviour through meaningful interactions with diverse communities (Zhang & Wu, 2023; Estrera, 2024). These findings indicate that volunteerism functions as an effective platform for holistic student development.

Despite the growing body of literature highlighting the benefits of volunteerism, existing research has primarily focused on outcomes such as motivation, employability, soft skills, and civic engagement, while comparatively limited empirical attention has been given to its direct influence on university students' character development. Furthermore, many studies have examined volunteerism within specific institutional or national contexts, limiting the generalisability of their findings across diverse higher education settings. This gap underscores the need for further empirical investigation into how volunteer participation contributes to the development of essential character attributes among university students. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the impact of volunteerism on character development among university students, thereby providing empirical evidence that can support higher education institutions in strengthening volunteer initiatives as an integral component of holistic student development.

Volunteerism has gained increasing recognition as an important mechanism for promoting positive youth development and strengthening social responsibility among university students. Participation in volunteer

activities encourages students to become actively involved in addressing community needs, thereby fostering civic engagement, emotional intelligence, and socially responsible behaviours (Meemaduma & Booso, 2022). Through continuous interaction with diverse communities, students develop greater empathy, compassion, and ethical awareness while broadening their understanding of societal issues (Lv et al., 2024; Mei & Piang, 2026). In addition, community-based volunteer programmes enhance students' self-efficacy, confidence, and sense of responsibility towards others, which are fundamental attributes for personal and professional development (Kang & Kahar, 2022; Zahidi et al., 2022). Recent evidence further suggests that volunteerism strengthens students' social responsibility by improving emotional intelligence and fostering stronger relationships with the communities they serve (Jian et al., 2026). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that volunteerism serves as an effective educational approach for nurturing socially responsible, ethically conscious, and community-oriented graduates.

Character development refers to the cultivation of positive values, attitudes, and behaviours that influence how individuals make decisions, interact with others, and contribute to society (Meemaduma & Booso, 2022; Estrera, 2024). Within higher education, character development has become a fundamental educational outcome as universities are increasingly expected to produce graduates who possess not only academic competence but also integrity, leadership, empathy, responsibility, and civic-mindedness. These character attributes enable students to navigate complex social environments, establish meaningful interpersonal relationships, and contribute positively to society. Consequently, higher education institutions have increasingly incorporated co-curricular and community engagement activities into their educational frameworks to facilitate students' holistic, ethical, and moral development beyond traditional classroom learning.

Existing literature further indicates that character development is strongly influenced by experiential learning, particularly through community service and volunteer activities. Unlike classroom-based instruction, volunteerism provides authentic learning experiences that allow students to translate moral values into practical actions while interacting with individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Previous studies have consistently reported that participation in volunteer activities enhances ethical awareness, prosocial behaviour, leadership, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility (Lv et al., 2024; Mei & Piang, 2026; Johari, 2024; Jian et al., 2026). These findings suggest that character development is a multidimensional process that extends beyond academic instruction and is significantly strengthened through meaningful community engagement. Therefore, volunteerism can be regarded as an important experiential learning platform that facilitates the development of responsible, ethical, and socially engaged university students.

Volunteerism has been widely recognised as an effective experiential learning approach that contributes significantly to the development of university students' character. Through active participation in community service and volunteer programmes, students are exposed to diverse social environments that encourage them to develop positive personal values while strengthening their understanding of civic responsibility. Such experiences enable students to translate theoretical knowledge into practical action, thereby fostering responsibility, empathy, tolerance, honesty, confidence, and resilience through direct engagement with community members (Hoi & Yin, 2023; Noh & Mohd Zahid, 2021). By participating in meaningful social initiatives, students are also encouraged to reflect on societal issues, broaden their perspectives, and develop a stronger commitment to contributing positively to society.

Existing literature consistently demonstrates that volunteerism contributes to multiple dimensions of character development. One of the most prominent outcomes is leadership development, as volunteer activities provide students with opportunities to plan programmes, coordinate community projects, make decisions, and work collaboratively with individuals from diverse backgrounds. These authentic experiences enhance leadership competence while simultaneously strengthening communication, teamwork, initiative, and problem-solving abilities (Hoi & Yin, 2023). Similarly, students who assume leadership roles within volunteer organisations demonstrate greater confidence, social competence, and organisational skills through increased responsibility and collaboration with community stakeholders (Jones & Giles, 2022).

Volunteerism also plays an essential role in cultivating students' sense of social responsibility by increasing their awareness of community issues and encouraging active participation in addressing social challenges. Through continuous interaction with disadvantaged communities, students develop greater empathy, compassion, and civic-mindedness while recognising their responsibilities as members of society. Empirical evidence indicates that participation in university volunteer programmes enhances students' understanding of social issues, strengthens their commitment to community service, and promotes responsible citizenship (Arbain et al., 2023; Noh & Mohd Zahid, 2021). These experiences reinforce ethical values and encourage

students to become more socially conscious individuals who actively contribute to community well-being.

Furthermore, volunteer experiences contribute to the development of self-confidence and interpersonal competence. Students are frequently required to undertake unfamiliar responsibilities, communicate with individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds, and overcome practical challenges throughout volunteer activities. Successfully accomplishing these tasks strengthens their self-efficacy and confidence while improving communication, teamwork, and interpersonal relationships (Kang & Kahar, 2022; Hoi & Yin, 2023). Consistent with these findings, Noh and Mohd Zahid (2021) reported that volunteers developed greater flexibility, communication skills, and the ability to work effectively within diverse teams.

Collectively, these findings suggest that volunteerism provides an integrated platform for developing leadership, social responsibility, self-confidence, communication, and teamwork, all of which represent essential dimensions of character development among university students. Therefore, volunteerism should be regarded as an important educational strategy for producing graduates who are not only academically competent but also ethically responsible, socially engaged, and equipped with the interpersonal competencies required to contribute meaningfully to society.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design to evaluate the impact of volunteerism on character development among university students in Malaysia. A total of 155 undergraduate students from public universities, including Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and several other higher education institutions, participated in the study. Respondents were selected using a convenience sampling technique, and data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: demographic information and items measuring the impact of volunteerism on character development using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics through descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while the internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis. The overall Cronbach's alpha value of 0.984 indicated excellent reliability, demonstrating that the measurement instrument possessed a high level of internal consistency and was appropriate for subsequent data analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profiles

Table 1.0 presents the demographic profile of the 155 respondents who participated in this study. Based on gender, the majority of respondents were female, representing 58.7%, while male respondents accounted for 41.3%. This indicates that female respondents were more actively involved in the survey. In terms of age group, most respondents were between 21 and 23 years old, comprising 63.9% of the total sample. This was followed by respondents aged 24 years old and above at 21.3%, while respondents aged 18–20 years old represented 14.8%. Regarding the year of study, the majority of respondents were Year 3 students, accounting for 51.6%. Year 4 students represented 18.7%, while both Year 1 and Year 2 students each accounted for 14.8%. Based on university affiliation, the largest proportion of respondents came from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), representing 34.2% of the total sample. This was followed by respondents from Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM) at 5.2%, while Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) each contributed 4.5%. The remaining respondents were distributed across various public and private universities in Malaysia. Overall, the findings indicate that the respondents consisted of students from diverse educational backgrounds, with a higher representation of female respondents, individuals aged 21–23 years old, and Year 3 students.

TABLE 1.0
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE (N=155)

Profile	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	91	58.7
	Male	64	41.3
Age Group	18-20 years old	23	14.8
	21-23 years old	99	63.9
	24 years old and above	33	21.3
Year of Study	Year 1	23	14.8
	Year 2	23	14.8
	Year 3	80	51.6
	Year 4	29	18.7
University	University Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	53	34.2
	Others	13	8.4
	University Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM)	8	5.2
	University Malaya (UM)	7	4.5
	University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UnisZA)	7	4.5
	University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)	7	4.5
	University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	6	3.9
	University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	6	3.9
	University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)	6	3.9
	University Kuala Lumpur (UniKL)	5	3.2
	University Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM)	3	1.9
	Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)	3	1.9
	Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA)	3	1.9
	University Putra Malaysia (UPM)	3	1.9
	Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	3	1.9
	Multimedia University (MMU)	2	1.3
	Open University Malaysia (OUM)	2	1.3
	Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	2	1.3
	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)	2	1.3
	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)	2	1.3
	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM)	2	1.3
	Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP)	2	1.3

Reliability Test

Reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement instrument used in this study. According to Pallant (2016), Cronbach's alpha is a widely accepted measure of internal consistency that assesses the extent to which the items within a construct are closely related and consistently measure the same underlying concept. Pallant (2016) further classifies Cronbach's alpha values of 0.90 and above as indicating excellent reliability, values between 0.80 and 0.89 as good**,** 0.70 and 0.79 as acceptable**,** 0.60 and 0.69 as questionable**,** 0.50 and 0.59 as poor**,** and values below 0.50 as unacceptable**.**

As presented in Table 2.0, the reliability analysis was performed for the study constructs, namely leadership development, social responsibility, communication and interpersonal skills, and character development. The overall instrument, comprising four constructs, produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.984, indicating excellent internal consistency. This exceptionally high reliability coefficient demonstrates that the measurement items consistently captured the intended constructs and exhibited a high degree of homogeneity. Therefore, the instrument was considered sufficiently reliable for assessing the impact of volunteerism on character development among university students, providing confidence in the consistency and credibility of the data collected for subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 2.0
RELIABILITY TEST

Variable	Item(n)	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Assumed
Evaluating the Impact of Volunteerism on Character Development Among University Students	4	0.984	Excellent

Descriptive Analysis

Table 3.0 presents the descriptive statistics for the character development construct based on responses from 155 university students. The findings indicate that the respondents reported a relatively high level of character development, with a mean score of 3.395 with standard deviation 0.804. This suggests that participation in volunteer activities is generally associated with positive character attributes among the respondents, reflecting favourable perceptions of leadership, social responsibility, communication, teamwork, and self-confidence. Although responses varied across the measurement scale, the overall results demonstrate that volunteerism contributes positively to students' character development, supporting the notion that experiential learning through community engagement fosters holistic personal growth.

Table 1.2
LEVEL OF MEAN SCORE RANGE

Mean Score Range	Level
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.67	Medium
3.68 – 5.00	High

TABLE 4.0
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Evaluating the Impact of Volunteerism on Character Development Among University Students	155	3.3948	0.80355

CONCLUSION

Volunteerism was analyzed for its impact on the development of characters among university students in Malaysia as this study sought to analyze the extent to which volunteering helped the development of good personal attributes. The results showed that university students exhibited a high degree of development of personal characters and, therefore, volunteerism is important in ensuring the development of leadership qualities, social responsibility, good communication skills, team spirit, and self-confidence. Such results support the growing body of literature indicating that volunteerism acts as an effective experiential learning strategy that compliments traditional classroom-based learning in the process of equipping students with knowledge as well as moral and social values. The study shows the need for incorporation of volunteerism in higher education for holistic development of students. It has been noted that there is a rising demand for universities to train students who have academic prowess as well as ethical values and leadership qualities besides being socially responsible. Volunteerism has proved to be a platform for attaining these qualities through constant community service where empathy, resilience, responsibility, and teamwork are developed in students. Higher education institutions should, therefore, develop strategies that will encourage and facilitate such developments. On the theoretical front, this paper adds value to the current research literature with empirical support for the notion that volunteerism is positively related to character development in university students in the Malaysian higher education environment. Unlike the other papers that have mostly concentrated on the benefits of volunteering on employability, motivation and soft skills, the current paper provides evidence on how volunteerism plays a significant role in character development of university students and is an important aspect in the production of socially responsible graduates. The results of this study, therefore, confirm the relevance of experiential learning theory that posits that learning takes place through experience. Nevertheless, some of the constraints need to be considered. First, the research design used is cross-sectional and involves convenience sampling, hence, reducing the generalizability of the results obtained and makes it impossible to determine causality in relation to the effect of volunteering on character development. Secondly, the sample size used in the study is small, involving only students from selected Malaysian universities, which might not fully represent the entire population of university students. It is recommended that future research utilize larger and representative samples, use probability sampling method and conduct longitudinal research to analyse the impact of consistent volunteer activities on character development. Finally, future research can incorporate other variables like motivation, institutional support, frequency of volunteer activities or culture among others. In summary, volunteerism is a good educational approach since it goes beyond community services to develop personal traits and ethics in students. Increased engagement of volunteerism in universities and colleges is essential for character building among students, which will produce graduates who will be able to make meaningful contributions to the society in the future.

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