

## Evaluation on Impact of Self-Initiated Project Scheme on University Education: Case Study

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## 1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

**Objective:** To evaluate whether self-initiated project (SIP) can promote the development of *global leadership* as part of holistic education.

**Participants:** 16 students who joined the self-initiated project.

**Methods:** All participants finished Reflective journals with five open-ended questions. Two-independent reviewers summarized and counted the main points of learnt attributes from the reflective journal based on nine components of global leaderships.

**Results:** Individual attributes, group dynamic and global vision were the three major categories identified. Being flexible and creative, passionate, have an open and cooperative mind, skills of conflict resolution and effective communication are the attributes that are frequently mentioned by the students in the reflective journal.

**Conclusions:** Creativity thinking, interpersonal/social skills and inquisitiveness are the three significant components on global leaderships.

Keywords: Global Leadership, Self-Initiated Project, Global citizen, Experiential Learning.

## 2. Introduction

“Whole-person development” or “holistic education” is the vision promoted by the Hong Kong Government under the New Secondary Scheme (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). It is defined as teaching which involves a broad spectrum of human experiences in philosophical learning and influential teaching so that students can learn in an environment with more autonomy, democracy, development of critical and comprehensive mindset thinking as a unique individual and global citizen with individual, social and global perspectives (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). Since 2012, students in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) are required to take a credit-bearing service-learning (SL) subjects before graduation.

Being mandatory, SL is a subject which integrates serving with learning through a combination of knowledge input, practice and reflections to enrich students’ experiences (Office of Service Learning, 2018). The aim of SL is to provide an opportunity for students to apply acquired knowledge into their experiences of community services, as well as to enhance students’ sense of civic responsibility through serving. Meanwhile, resources and services are provided to the needy in the local community, all of which contribute to a win-win situation.

Upon completion of SL subjects, outstanding students are eligible to join a non-mandatory Self-Initiated Project (SIP) Scheme which will be led by students themselves, combining their knowledge, experience and demonstrating their love by extending provision of service to the needy population.

As SL is a structured credit-bearing course, for which the service plan is mostly

pre-arranged by the teaching team, participating students might not have the chance to be involved in the logistics planning of the service that they deliver. By contrast, SIP is a voluntary non-credit bearing student-led project which greatly highlight their independence, autonomy and leadership. Since there is no longer a teacher in the team, all participating students are wholly responsible for the planning, implementation and evaluation. These phases include activities, such as brainstorming with the objectives, drafting of the project proposal, seeking the funding, searching for collaborative organizations (NGOs), logistics on site, and finally, evaluating the outcomes. Moreover, SIP allows students to "drill deep" into specific topics by taking insight from previous service experiences, visits and consultations made with local NGOs. Whilst SL might have a designated area planned in the curriculum, as an alternative approach, SIP aims at promoting students to be more all-rounded and also to sustain their overall development due to the nature of full autonomy and self responsibility for the whole project as the context of overseas projects.

### 3. Research Aim

This paper reports on a study that explores the impacts of SIP. The focus is on both what and how participating students learn and it evaluates SIP can promote the development of **global leadership** as part of holistic education.

### 4. Theoretical Framework

The framework as explained in the book "*From noble to global: The attributes of global leadership*" by Patterson, Dannhauser and Stone's (2007) is adopted as the basis for discussion in this paper. They argue that a special set of competencies and skills are required to be a "global leader", namely:

1. *Foreign experience* - able to learn from cross functional and international experience
2. *Cultural interest and sensitivity* -able to learn about cultures, work with and learn from people of many cultures simultaneously;
3. *Creative thinking and innovative* - able to build a social climate for innovation;
4. *Empower others* - able to coach, teach and develop teams, foster teamwork;
5. *Collaborative leadership* - able to build strategic relationships; interact with foreign colleagues as equals;
6. *Self management skills* - able to drive for results, think analytically to make decisive judgments, lead ethically to make value-based decisions;
7. *Interpersonal/Social skills* - able to work effectively in social systems, adapt to living in a foreign culture, practice active listening and giving feedback;
8. *Self-awareness* - to possess a deep sense of themselves, including emotions, strengths, weaknesses, frustration sources and reactions to problems; and
9. *Inquisitiveness* - to consistently seek out knowledge and expertise beyond boundaries, obtain knowledge and information from multiple sources.

## 5. Research Method

The study focuses on the SIP Scheme namely “**You only live once (YOLO, ㄛ、愛)**” consisting of 16 students from various faculties of PolyU. Fifteen of them have enrolled for the SL subjects in previous years, including “*Healthy Lifestyle Challenges for Developing Communities*” (SN2S03) which shares the similar background, experiences and possible collaborating NGOs such that the SIP can be considered as the logical expansion and extension of the SN2S03. The SIP team drafted the proposal, planned for the project, prepared the materials and visited a selected orphanage, slum community and rural villages in Cambodia, as targets for healthcare related services. The service components are mainly transferring knowledge about prevention of mosquito-borne diseases prevention; demonstrating skills on wound management; and oral health and promoting food safety. All of these are executed in a self-organized and self-managed manner after seeking advice from a project advisor, the subject lecturer of SL subject SN2S03, School of Nursing, PolyU.

## 6. Data Collection

For data collection, a qualitative retrospective approach was adopted in this study. A total of 16 reflective journals from all participating students were collected based on the template designed by the School of Nursing Student Leadership Development Programmes. Students are required to answer the 5 questions when writing the reflective journal.

## 7. Data analysis

For data analysis, the main themes as related to the 9 dimensions of a Global *Leader* were manually captured and summarized from the student reflective journals for further comparison by 2 independent reviewers in the SIP.

Data was analyzed using the conventional content analysis. Researchers wrote down as many headings as possible while reading through the 16 reflective journals to describe all aspects of content. Researchers were paired up to code the competencies or skills independently. The coding labels were then continuously compared and discussed. After open coding, lists of categories were grouped under higher order headings and similar ones were collapsed so as to reduce the number of categories.

## 8. Results and Discussion

The common ideas mentioned in the reflections are categorized into 3 domains: individual attributes, group dynamics and global vision. Several attributes of global leadership (Patterson, Dannhauser & Stone, 2007) are of prime importance as reflected in students’ words, includes creativity thinking, interpersonal skills and inquisitiveness. The most significant impact upon the teammates is the individual’s flexibility and creativity as part of the problem-solving skills. Empowering the service recipients, such as the local volunteers, is necessary, as they can locally transfer the knowledge to others. Being passionate in applying

professional knowledge into useful information for the service recipients is also another notable influence for the students.

### *Group dynamic*

In terms of teamwork, an open and cooperative mind are frequently mentioned in the reflective journals, which is the prerequisite of *inquisitiveness*. Moreover, regarding the interaction among teammates, the skills of conflict resolution, which involves effective communication, is another notable lesson for the group. When the team needs to work together, division of labour is useful in productivity, which allows the more confident to help the less confident.

### *Individual attributes*

The component of *creative thinking* and innovative is the most significant in SIP. A situation which highlighted by a students in reflective journal is that they had freedom to use the local resources and tailor-make the cover of the water tank in order to carry out mosquito prevention for the local village residents. As the materials brought from Hong Kong were not enough for students to make a secure water tank cover. This incident indicated that students can be flexible when facing unexpected events. This can further help the empowerment of the service recipients, as long as they have the intention to learn from the knowledge which truly fits their environment, situation and limitations. Flexibility and creativity are crucial elements in global leadership. Thus holistic education, such that students are able to adapt to any unexpected changes and deal with them actively with their broad experience learnt in the past, is part of the risk management when students were required to develop contingency plans and react to any unexpected events during the trip in Cambodia.

The second and third significant impacts of component is *self-management skills* along with *interpersonal* skills. Since SIP is organized, designed and guided by the students, they are able to participate in active planning and decision making without the limit from faculties or departments such that they were able to acquire self-management skills under high autonomy which is highlighted under the principle of holistic education (Flake, 2000). During the decision-making process, conflict resolution plays an important role in the process of a healthy team dynamic. A notable point of reflection by a student highlighted the experience of harmonic participatory democracy during the discussion, such that the whole team was able to discuss critically and work without solely following the leader's instruction. This process develops self-management simultaneously as students were required to think critically in multiple aspects, including adjusting their own point of view with the views of their other team-mates. Students could realize that helping the less confident team-mates was not only a kind act, but also important in keeping everyone in the same pace, so as to enhance the productivity. This is an important composition of social skills, which is one of the components of being a global leader, in order to work efficiently and also empower the team.

*Global vision*

In the perspective of individual attributes, SIP can strengthen the concepts introduced by SL subjects in terms of the *cultural interest and sensitivity* and *collaborative leadership*. During the planning of the overseas project, students fully utilized the characteristics of SIP and tried to adjust their expectations when they saw the needs in the slum. Such action allowed students to have a deeper understanding of the situation in communities, such as fitting in with the level of understanding and educational level of the service recipients. Through such adjustment, students could teach these communities healthcare knowledge with the use of local resources, with the aim of tailor-making them in a sustainable manner. Such persistence engenders the spirit of empathy, as mentioned by Hoffman (2001), making the service recipients realise that our perception of their situation is as congruent to their perception as possible as another meaning of cultural sensitivity as culture and values are part of empathetic consideration. Furthermore, as mentioned by a vice president in the team, the progress of collaborating and cooperating with NGOs also consolidates the development of responsible global citizenship, as participating students had a deeper understanding of the culture and more chances in exchanging ideas with the locals. In this context, the students could learn deeper and more diversely in different aspects in such an independent and cooperation-demanding scenario.

## 9. Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice

SIP is an invaluable and indispensable experience in developing students to learn in a holistic perspective. It enables participants to be responsible global citizens, with self-management, independent learning, individual development, team-building and enhancement of communication skills. These elements are unique and irreplaceable, when compared to a traditional conventional classroom setting in university education. Such experiential learning should be promoted for university students in order to enhance their attributes of self-awareness, self-management, creativity, empathy, interpersonal / social skills, collaborative leadership and responsible citizenship in preparing them continue to serve the society after graduation.

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