

## Self-Driven Co-Curricular Activities: A Subtle Way to Enhance Students' Soft Skills

<sup>1</sup>JumaliHj Selamat, <sup>1,2</sup>Khaidzir Hj. Ismail, <sup>1,3</sup>Azizan Ahmad and <sup>4</sup>Siti ArpahNoordin

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Learning Accreditation,

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 43600 Bangi, Selangor Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>School of Psychology and Human Development, Faculty of Social Sciences  
and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Science and Technology,

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kampus,  
Puncak Perdana 40150 Shah Alam Selangor, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** The concept of co-curriculum in UKM provides an opportunity for students to hone and master soft skills to improve the quality of self-development. Activities or projects' implementation are student-driven, able to develop soft skills, flexible learning environment and enjoyable, original or authentic, through experiential learning in order to get total learning experience based on trust and honesty. There are free to plan and perform any activities under supervision in order to improve their soft skills. This noble effort intends to help prepare students wholly to face the job market upon graduation. The concept applies to UKM students since semester 1 session 2012/2013. It is about 3500 students gain the benefit of new concept of co-curriculum.

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**Key words:** Co-curriculum • Undergraduates • Learning contract • Learning outcomes • Soft skills

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### INTRODUCTION

Co-curricular activities seem to complement the academic curriculum through live experience activities as well as instilling talents in order to enhance self-development. Co-curricular activities, planned and implemented by students, are able to cultivate soft skills. In the process of acquiring these skills, students have a lot to undergo. There are hurdles and restrictions awaiting them in their bid to grow and develop themselves into becoming individuals who are able to face the challenging world [1]. Students should possess qualities such as perseverance, dedication, courageous and commitment in order to master soft skills and be successful in life.

Co-curriculum courses can be the paths for students to develop their interest and talents within their scope of studies [2, 3]. Organizing various activities or projects, indirectly, expose students to the real world, work culture

and genuine challenges. These experiences will help build positive personality and develop soft skills at the same time [4]. The concept of co-curriculum, learning contract, aims and learning outcomes, implementation and assessment of the co-curriculum discussed here on.

The idea to have Credited co-curriculum based on a learning contract that is presently being implemented at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) came from The Vice Chancellor following her concern on the mastery level of soft skills among UKM students [5]. This is a new approach to challenge the traditional approached in implementing and assessing co-curriculum in higher institutions in Malaysia. UKM has transformed the concept of learning and its students' mind set in relation to acquiring knowledge and adopted a more practical assessment method. The concept of co-curriculum at UKM based on eight (8) principles: self-driven, authentic, enjoyable, total learning experience, flexible, soft skills, experiential learning and honor.

Co-curriculum involves self-driven activities aimed at acquiring knowledge and soft-skills. These activities or projects are carried out at different learning centres chosen by the students themselves depending on their interests and inclinations with the aim to enhance their talents and skills in a flexible and enjoyable learning environment. Students' involvements and apprehensions through experiential learning and authentic activities make co-curriculum a complement to total learning experience based on the values of trust and honour, which is in line with the Centre for Learning Accreditation's goal and UKM's aspiration [5].

**Learning Contract:** The concept of learning contract was developed by Knowles (1980) based on self-learning [6]. On the other hand, Merriam and Caffarella (1991) define learning contract as a form of learning that requires students to plan, implement and assess their own achievement [7]. Since then, learning contract has been used widely in the curriculum for the teaching of social work and enhancing students in the lecture room [8-14].

In the UKM's context, learning contract is the agreement on an activity or project between the student and the supervisor. The student is responsible towards the planning and carrying out of all activities/projects as mutually agreed with the supervisor [5].

Students draw up plans for the said activity/project to fulfill the eight (8) credit hours and achieve all the eight (8) learning outcomes as specified in the learning contract. All plans and consensual agreement are stated in the learning contract based on trust and honesty. The process begins when the student and supervisor have agreed on an activity/project in conjunction with any clubs or organisations registered to UKM as a credited co-curricular activity and approved by the JPPel up to the point after the activity/project has been carried out and the learning outcomes have been assessed. The assessment of the learning contract requires that the eight (8) learning outcomes stated are achieved. Also, the said activities/ projects need to fulfill 320 notional hours. Consensus, implementation and assessment of the activity /project can be done on-line through the Soft skillsDevelopment System (SSDS) at [www.ukm.my/spi](http://www.ukm.my/spi).

At the same time, the process of the contract used relates to student's ability to increase the understanding about the organisation, self enhancement and shared sense of responsibility [14, 15-17]. The implementation of learning contract takes off when the head of project

registers the activity / project through the Soft skillsDevelopment System (SSDS) which contains information as stated in the agreed learning contract. Each activity / project carried out must bear at least 80 notional hours or two (2) credit hours every semester. Nevertheless, students are encouraged to participate in various activities in each semester. Students are encouraged to complete the activity/program in their 2<sup>nd</sup>. year to avoid any interruption to their thesis writing/practical which normally takes place in the 3<sup>rd</sup>. year (or in their final year). The students are responsible at choosing, planning and carrying out all activities/projects.

In order to strengthen the student's understanding of learning contract, explanations and simulations are carried out, targeted group consisting of academic administration faculty, students' organizations, clubs and societies as well as the UKM Students Council. This effort is crucial to ensure that the University's administration is very clear on the importance of learning contract and its implementation and, together, uphold the program for the betterment of UKM students. Self-driven co-curricular activities implemented to UKM students since semester 1 session 2012/2013. It is about 3500 students strongly agree and support the new concept of co-curriculum.

#### **Co-Curriculum: Goals and Learning Outcomes:**

At UKM, co-curricular activities are intended to compliment the academic curriculum in order to create and produce wholistic graduates, in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual, through living experiences in many different talent generating contexts. Upon completion of the co-curriculum activities, students will have acquired eight (8) learning outcomes of the following rubrics:

#### **Soft Skills and Sense of Responsibility:**

- Display responsible behaviours towards self and others
- Sensitive towards to the environment
- Sensitive and responsible towards social situations like unity, poverty, etc.

#### **Communication Skills:**

- Display effective non-verbal skills (body language, tone of voice, etc.)
- Deliver ideas effectively verbal and in writing
- Able to interact effectively
- Able to interact using the international language

**Information Management and Life Long Learning:**

- Plan strategically to obtain knowledge and skills
- Explore and solve issues/problems that need solving-on their own
- Self gather and manage information

**Values, Attitudes, Ethics and Professionalism:**

- Show professional behaviours appropriate to work ethics
- Carry out responsibilities with integrity and sincerity
- Display voluntarism attitudes

**Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Scientific Approach:**

- Identify visible and hidden problems
- Identify and synthesize problems accurately
- Evaluate different alternatives and make decisions based on accurate information

**Leadership and Teamwork:**

- Lead or follow in acceptable situations
- Build teamwork to achieve consensus goal
- Help other members proactively

**Management and Entrepreneurial Skills:**

- Generate/suggest/plan ideas after evaluating choices
- Determine future goals in-lined with planned activities
- Able to plan, implement, control and evaluate activities systematically
- Delegate, empower and be responsible to others

**Creative and Innovative Skills:**

- Always explore new ideas
- Generate creative ideas and be innovative as an added value
- Always able to face obstacles and crave for opportunities

This approach aims at having each student successfully achieve the eight (8) learning outcomes which are soft skills and sense of responsibility, information management and life long learning, values, attitudes, ethics and professionalism, critical thinking, problem

solving and scientific approach, leadership and teamwork, management and entrepreneurial skills, creative and innovative skills [5].

Students who have achieved the eight (8) learning outcomes shall have great abilities in communication skills, good teamwork, able to plan and organise activities through analytical thinking, with effective problem solving and leadership skills [18-20]. Students' involvements in academics and social activities are contributors to their successes and in turn, reflects the index quality performance of a higher institution [21-24]. In addition, students will be able to adapt experience gained in various contexts and ready to compete in the local and international market.

**The Implementation of Co-curriculum:** The implementation of co-curricular activity is as agreed in the learning contract based on the following principles:

- The activity must not be less than eight (8) credits (320 notional hours) as specified in The Malaysian Qualifying Framework (MQF)
- Students are encouraged to complete the activity/program in their 2nd. year to avoid any interruption against their thesis writing or practical which normally takes place in the 3rd. year (or in their final year)
- A student can choose and decide on the type of activity/project, to be implemented based on experiential learning, student's interest and inclination, where learning is through problem solving and/or current issues.
- The student is responsible at choosing, planning and carrying out all activities/projects consistent with the learning outcomes as stated in the learning contract and to choose either an internal or external supervisor to supervise, control and evaluate the learning outcomes..
- Approval and code for the activity/project is produced by the Student Service Department (JPPel) only, while the Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA) holds responsibility to evaluate and recognise the learning contract.
- The student is responsible at achieving all the eight (8) learning outcomes as specified in the learning contract.
- It is the student's responsibility to decide the credit weight that he/she can handle and it is encouraged that he carries out the co-curriculum activity during the semester break i.e outside the academic semester's calendar.

- The maximum period to complete the eight (8) credit (320 notional hours) co-curriculum is throughout the student's academic/study period (as specified by the faculty, respectively)
- The student can keep track of his/her performance status and hours gained for every activity/project accomplished via online.
- The student will carry out the activity/project at the learning centre of their choice. The performance and achievement of the learning outcomes will be a collective and ongoing process.
- The student can cancel/change the activity/project in progress by informing the Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA) and the supervisor. The student can also register a new activity/project at the Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA) after obtaining approval from the Student Service Department (JPPel).
- The credit value of the activity/project is considered as workload for the lecturer made supervisor by the student, respectively and approved by their Heads/Deputy Dean/Dean.

**Evaluation:** The student identifies his/her learning outcomes to be achieved through mutual agreement with the supervisor. Evaluation shall be done by the chosen supervisor and *endorsed* by the Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA). Evaluation on the activity/project is based on the learning outcomes' rubrics that have been specified. Students can improve their achievements and performance on the learning outcomes through some other activity/project. The final co-curriculum grade is resulted from all activities/projects accumulated. However, the student is allowed to appeal before the final grade is awarded and approved by the Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA). Finally, the evaluation scale is based on the student's achieved learning outcomes and assessed as Weak (1-3), Satisfactory (4-7), or Good (8-10).

## CONCLUSION

Generally, this concept of credited co-curriculum based on learning contract, as being implemented at UKM, gives huge benefits in producing students who are equipped with soft-skills. There are four vital elements involved in the discussion: the concept of learning contract, implementation process, achievement of learning outcomes and assessment mechanism. Efforts have to be taken to improvise and strengthen each element in order to secure students' expectation towards the

implementation of this program. Among the steps that can be taken are to have continuous briefings, open day, the use of a system and to elect representatives from faculties and colleges., sufficient time is also needed to examine the effectiveness of the program in depth. Last but not least, all the activities will be evaluated for giving grade to the students based on their soft skills performance.

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