

## University Students' Feedback about Service Learning in China

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### Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Beijing International Studies University (BISU) is one of the universities in China that has adopted service learning in recent years. The current study aimed to examine university students' feedback about service learning in China, which is highly significant because it will provide evidence for possible ways of curriculum reform and education innovation in China.

**Study Design:** A cross-sectional survey was distributed and collected from students at different age groups in BISU about their feedback on participation and cultivation of civic responsibility, acquisition of knowledge and skills, cultivation of moral values and ethics between March and April 2016.

**Methodology:** Data were collected from university students (n=128) studying at BISU in China using modified evaluation questionnaire. The results of the descriptive and inferential data were examined using Chi-squared and the post-hoc Tuckey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) tests.

**Results:** The response rate was 85.3% (128/150); 24 males and 124 females participated in this research. The average percentage of respondents with agreed feedback was significantly ( $P<0.0001$ ) higher than respondents with disagreed feedback. Analysis of results of each part of the questionnaire showed that the percentage frequency of respondents with agreed response was significantly ( $P<0.0001$ ) higher than respondents with disagreed feedback.

**Conclusion:** The study showed that university students have positive feedback on service learning in China. Service learning promoted cultivation of civic responsibility, acquisition of knowledge and

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skills and cultivation of moral values and ethics. Besides, service learning can be considered as an effective way to eradicate the stigma of examination-oriented education.

*Keywords: University students; service learning; cross-sectional survey; Beijing International Studies University (BISU).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, service learning was proposed in the United States for the first time. By definition, service learning combines educational goals with service to the community, and the community and schools are equal partners [1]. Service learning programs involve students in activities that address local needs and develop their academic skills and commitment to their community. Students who take part in service learning programs are active learners rather than passive recipients. Universities have valuable resources and long-standing tradition of serving their communities by strengthening the economic development of the region, addressing education needs of the community, and contributing to the cultural life of the community [2-5]. Therefore, universities usually serve as providers who facilitate students and faculties to engage in service learning programs.

As what Aristotle said, "What we have learned to do, we learn by doing" [6]. Therefore education must create opportunities for students to experience activities that will foster their skills, values, shoulder civic responsibility and contribute to the community good. During service learning, students are challenged to move outside their comfort zone and work directly with diverse populations. Although Service learning is one kind of experiential learning that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, however there are distinction between service learning and other types of experiential learning. It is always important to realize that service learning is designed to be an integral part of the curriculum and mutually beneficial to the service providers and the recipients, and there are intentional learning goals for the service provider [1].

There have been some scholars who have done research on the benefit of service learning. For example, some scholars have maintained that service learning can provide a great number of opportunities to foster both capability (critical thinking, social interaction, communication) as well as commitment (responsibility) for the

students to act as social change agents in the long run [7,8]. Also, service learning can generate possibilities for students to learn how to be everyday makers of their local community by addressing local problems, such as waste management that conform to collective dilemmas [9]. Service learning is concerned with reflection because during service learning students are inclined to question the status quo (or what is known) and put forward solutions that are based on knowledge and skills. Therefore, service learning cultivates a different way of thinking about what is currently known [10]. Besides, service learning can help students to promote the understanding of their theoretical content in the school so that they are more likely to graduate [11]. In general, service learning combines classroom knowledge as well as practical service together and teaches students how to be an active and responsible citizen in the life of a local community in order to improve the living conditions of the local people, reshape the future of local community and strengthen their own understanding of theoretical knowledge and useful skills.

China's education system has always been criticized as "examination-oriented education". In a broad sense, examination-oriented education is an education system that targets only on increasing test scores and the rate of enrollment of higher-level educational institutions with spoon-feeding as its main pedagogical approach [12]. Therefore, students are compelled to aspire relentlessly higher scores in test to increase his own probability of recruitment of higher educational institutions as well as to win appraisals from the parents, teachers and the admiration from their peers. However, single pursuit in test scores gives no credit for a healthy, responsible and capable citizen. Just as Jing put it: "Social responsibility, innovative spirit as well as application skills are key factors to evaluate the integrative quality of a student" [13]. Therefore, educators and researchers have focused their attention on service learning in which students have opportunities to engage in intentionally designed reciprocal activities that facilitate communities and their own studies.

**Table 1. Main themes of service learning in BISU**

| <b>Scope of service learning</b>     | <b>Communities and recipients of service learning</b>                     | <b>Programs and activities of service learning</b>                               |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Tutorship                            | Kindergartens and primary schools for children                            | Help them to learn schoolwork and answer puzzling questions                      |
| Environmental protection             | Local streets and outskirts for residents                                 | Post posters to call for environmental protection. Organize no-smoking campaigns |
| Social support                       | Nursing homes for lonely elders and welfare institutions for the disables | Take care of the elders and the disables   |
| International events and conferences | Airports, train stations, Sports fields for the participants              | Work as translators, interpreters and liaison officers                           |
| Cultural exchanges                   | Libraries, museums, parks for visitors                                    | Art show, books sales, assisting surveys, visiting guide                         |

In 2008, Nankai University first launched service learning courses to teach young university volunteer students service skills and knowledge. The aim of the action was to combine classroom teaching with community service in order to promote volunteer service skills and responsible citizenship [14]. Recent years more and more universities have followed the steps. Beijing International Studies University (BISU) is one of the universities in China to adopt service learning in the form of implementing the establishment of the volunteer practices as part of requirement for credits, which is highly institutionally designed by combining the university education and youth volunteer service together, aiming to impart fundamental service knowledge, skills, and values to young students so that they can serve for their community from different angles (Table 1). Some of the service learning programs are organized by the university, while a large number of programs are arranged by joint ventures of the university institution, student organization and Beijing Volunteer Association (BVA). The last one is very large voluntary organization that recruits, educates, distributes, and organizes major volunteer services across Beijing. It includes over 2 million active volunteers and over 120000 subordinate volunteer organizations [15]. The faculties and students who participate in service learning programs must be trained with manners and social service skills, basic concepts of social work, language ability and cross-cultural comprehension, holistic views and cooperative values. The efforts of volunteer service learning programs expect to enrich the educational experience of students and therefore promote their language skills and aspiring citizenship among them. Young students aim to improve the human condition and the

quality of life in the community with traits of idealism, humanitarianism and professionalism.

Students' feedback can be quite important in improving the design of the service learning and exploring the real needs and problems bother them. Also, as service learning is a new pedagogical practice, it can serve as strong evidence for future curriculum reform and education innovation in China, which may eradicate the stigma of examination-oriented education. However, as an emerging pedagogical practice in China, few researchers have done investigation on the feedback of service learning for university students in China. Therefore, this study is conducted to evaluate university students' feedback towards service learning in China and fulfill this gap.

## **2. MATERIALS AND PARTICIPANTS**

### **2.1 Setting and Participants**

A descriptive cross-sectional questionnaire was made and distributed among university students in BISU between the 20<sup>th</sup> March to 27<sup>th</sup> April, 128 volunteers participated (24 males, 104 females) in this study.

### **2.2 Instruments**

The survey questionnaire on the feedback of service learning in China was designed based on the previous literature review in this field [16,17]. The survey questionnaire mainly focused on four dimensions of service learning: Demographic information of the respondents; the effects on participation and civic responsibility; the acquisition of knowledge and skills; the cultivation

of moral values and ethics. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of gender, age of the respondents. The second part consisted of knowledge, motivation, willingness and reflection. The third part consisted of legal rights, application of knowledge, thinking skills and communication skills. The fourth part consisted of attention to social problem, tolerance to others' weakness, the belief of offering help to others and the empathy to others in trouble. The questionnaire was designed into a 5-point Likert-scale format. (which means 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree).

## 2.3 Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed to the students on campus in March 2016 and students were asked to complete all the questionnaire parts anonymously and returned back to the distributor. The students are informed that the questionnaire was intended to investigate how university students view service learning in China and the findings will be used solely for research purposes. All together, 150 questionnaires were distributed and 128 of them were returned.

## 2.4 Statistic Analyses

The information of the feedback for the respondents such as frequencies and percentages was provided. For the difference of students' feedback, Chi-square test was used to assess the inferential statistics. The results of students' feedback were evaluated using Analysis of Variance(ANOVA) and Post-tukey's Honestly Significant Difference(HSD) to examine which means are significantly different from others. All questionnaire followed a significant level of 0.05. Statistical analysis software SPSS (22.0) was used.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Results

#### 3.1.1 The demographic information of the participants

A total of 128 students participated in this survey. The response rate of the study was 85.3%. As a foreign language University, female students were much more than male peers. Therefore, more female students participated in the survey. The range of student age was from 17 to 26 years old (see Table 2).

#### 3.1.2 Students feedback

Generally speaking, the outcomes of the average of the agreed feedback in three parts of the questionnaire including the following ones: the effects on participation and civic responsibility, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the cultivation of moral values and ethics ( $72.0 \pm 14.81$ ;  $61.7 \pm 10.36$ ;  $77.8 \pm 9.72$ ) were found highly significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ) when compared with the corresponding outcomes of the negative responses ( $10.0 \pm 6.75$ ;  $8.6 \pm 3.56$ ;  $5.1 \pm 1.87$ ) (Fig. 1).

##### *3.1.2.1 The participation and civic responsibility*

The frequencies of agreed students were much higher than the disagreed and neutral students in this part of questionnaire (Table 3).

##### *3.1.2.2 The acquisition of knowledge and skills*

The frequencies of agreed students were much higher than the disagreed and neutral students in this part of questionnaire (Table 4).

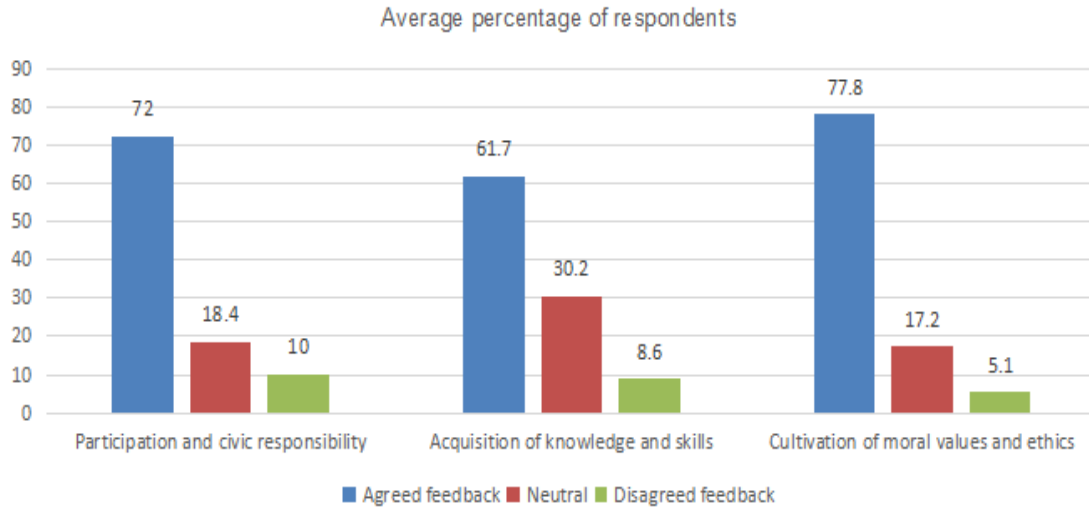
##### *3.1.2.3 The cultivation of moral values and ethics*

The frequencies of agreed students were much higher than the disagreed and neutral students in this part of questionnaire (Table 5).

## 3.2 Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine university students' feedback of service learning in China. The majority of the participated university students in this research have expressed a positive feedback of service learning in China. The high positive response rate in the study has demonstrated university students' enthusiasm and interest in service learning. Our findings coincide with the previous study that service learning has very positive impact on personal, attitudinal, moral, social, and cognitive outcomes [5,18,19,20,21]. The practice of service learning in university curriculum and requirement for scholarship can ease Chinese universities students' burden from sole pursuit of high scores under the pressure of examination-oriented education and make them more accessible to social reality, caring to the unprivileged and ready to serve in communities.

Limitations of the study include this research was conducted solely at one university. Future study can apply qualitative and quantitative study together to explore university students' feedback about service learning in different universities across the country.



**Fig. 1. The average percentages of respondents regarding feedback on different parts of the questionnaire**

The values stand for percentage of frequencies (Means ± SD). Tukey's Honestly significant Difference (HSD) was used. A p value <0.05 was considered as significant. The average percentage of agreed respondents was highly significant than the average percentage of disagreed respondents in each part. (P<0.0001)

**Table 2. Demographic information of the students (n=128)**

| Variables | Categories | Frequencies (%) |
|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| Gender    | Male       | 24(18.8%)       |
|           | Female     | 104(81.3%)      |
| Age       | 17-19      | 38(29.7%)       |
|           | 20-22      | 73(57.0%)       |
|           | 23-26      | 17(13.3%)       |

**Table 3. Students' feedback on the effect on participation and civic responsibility (n=128)**

| Statements   | Strongly agree/Agree | Neutral   | Strongly disagree/Disagree |
|--|----------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1. I have a basic command of knowledge about service learning after I learned and experienced service learning.                                    | 92(71.9%)*           | 27(21.1%) | 9(7.0%)                    |
| 2. I have a strong motivation to engage in service learning program after I learned and experienced service learning.                              | 87(69.0%)*           | 29(22.7%) | 12(9.4%)                   |
| 3. I have strengthened my cultural competence and willingness to accept people who are different after I learned and experienced service learning. | 117(91.4%)*          | 6(4.7%)   | 5(3.9%)                    |
| 4. I often reflect on whether I do things effectively and whether I can do more for others after I learned and experienced service learning.       | 71(55.5%)*           | 32(25%)   | 25(19.5%)                  |

The values stand for the percentages of given choices. Chi square test was used. A p value <0.05 was considered as significant.\*P<0.0001

**Table 4. Students' feedback on acquisition of knowledge and skills (n=128)**

| Statements   | Strongly agree/Agree | Neutral   | Strongly disagree/Disagree |
|--|----------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1. I am more concerned about laws and legal rights after I learned and experienced service learning.                   | 71(55.5%)*           | 41(32.0%) | 16(12.5%)                  |
| 2. I am more confident in applying my knowledge into practice after I learned and experienced service learning.        | 78(60.9%)*           | 39(30.5%) | 11(8.6%)                   |
| 3. I have improved my critical thinking skills and logical reasoning after I learned and experienced service learning. | 69(53.9%)*           | 47(38.7%) | 12(9.4%)                   |
| 4. I have improved my communication skills after I learned and experienced service learning.                           | 98(76.6%)*           | 25(19.5%) | 5(3.9%)                    |

The values stand for the percentages of given choices. Chi square test was used. A p value <0.05 was considered as significant. \*P<0.0001

**Table 5. Students' feedback on cultivation of moral values and ethics (n=128)**

| Statements   | Strongly agree/Disagree | Neutral   | Strongly disagree/Disagree |
|--|-------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| 1. I have been encouraged to attach more attention to social and political issues to erase others' problem after I learned and experienced service learning. | 114(89.1%)*             | 10(7.8%)  | 4(3.1%)                    |
| 2. I have been more tolerable to others' shortcomings and weaknesses after I have learned and experienced service learning.                                  | 93(72.7%)*              | 27(21.1%) | 8(6.3%)                    |
| 3. I have accepted that helping others as much as I can is a great pleasure for me after I have learned and experienced service learning.                    | 105(82.0%)*             | 18(14.1%) | 5(3.9%)                    |
| 4. I have become more emphatic about other people's troubles after I have learned and experienced service learning.  | 86(67.2%)*              | 33(25.8%) | 9(7.0%)                    |

The values stand for the percentages of given choices. Chi square test was used. A p value <0.05 was considered as significant. \*P<0.0001

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Implementing Service learning in China has showed positive effects on the cultivation of civic responsibility, acquisition of knowledge and skills and cultivation of moral values and ethics. The results of our study will be crucial to other universities' curriculum design and education innovation in China. It is advised that service learning should spread across more and more universities in China and become a new education paradigm.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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