



SERVICE LEARNING IN DATARAN MERDEKA AND LEARN THE HERITAGE OF KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

PELAYANAN BELAJAR DI DATARAN MERDEKA DAN BELAJAR WARISAN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Dataran Merdeka holds profound national and historical value as the site where Malaya's independence was proclaimed in 1957, yet tourists' understanding of its historical and architectural significance remains superficial. This community service activity aims to enhance the historical literacy of visitors and foster the involvement of local stakeholders in heritage conservation through educational media and participatory mentoring tailored to community needs. The implementation stages include observation to identify tourists' information needs and the role of local actors, the development of contextually appropriate historical educational materials, direct engagement with visitors, and capacity-building for local vendors and guides as independent cultural informants. Results indicate increased tourist interest in historical narratives, observable shifts in visitor behavior toward greater cultural appreciation, and active participation of local business actors in disseminating heritage information. This program is expected to contribute to enriching tourism experiences, strengthening community capacity, and supporting sustainable heritage preservation through collaboration among visitors, local enterprises, and educational institutions.

Keywords : Heritage Tourism, Community-University Partnership, Service Learning.

Abstrak

Dataran Merdeka memiliki nilai nasional dan historis yang mendalam sebagai tempat proklamasi kemerdekaan Malaya pada tahun 1957, namun pemahaman wisatawan tentang signifikansi sejarah dan arsitekturnya masih dangkal. Kegiatan pengabdian masyarakat ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan literasi sejarah pengunjung dan mendorong keterlibatan pemangku kepentingan lokal dalam pelestarian warisan budaya melalui media pendidikan dan pendampingan partisipatif yang disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan masyarakat. Tahapan pelaksanaannya meliputi observasi untuk mengidentifikasi kebutuhan informasi wisatawan dan peran aktor lokal, pengembangan materi pendidikan sejarah yang sesuai dengan konteks, keterlibatan langsung dengan pengunjung, dan peningkatan kapasitas bagi pedagang dan pemandu lokal sebagai informan budaya independen. Hasil menunjukkan peningkatan minat wisatawan terhadap narasi sejarah, pergeseran perilaku pengunjung yang terlihat menuju apresiasi budaya yang lebih besar, dan partisipasi aktif pelaku bisnis lokal dalam menyebarkan



informasi warisan budaya. Program ini diharapkan dapat berkontribusi untuk memperkaya pengalaman wisata, memperkuat kapasitas masyarakat, dan mendukung pelestarian warisan budaya yang berkelanjutan melalui kolaborasi antara pengunjung, perusahaan lokal, dan lembaga pendidikan.

Kata Kunci : Pariwisata Warisan Budaya, Kemitraan Komunitas-Universitas, Pembelajaran Berbasis Pelayanan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kuala Lumpur has evolved from a modest 19th-century tin-mining settlement into Malaysia's political, economic, and cultural capital. At the geographical and symbolic heart of the city lies Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Square), a site of profound national significance where the Union Jack was lowered and the Malayan flag was hoisted for the first time on 31 August 1957, marking the dawn of national independence. Surrounding the square is a meticulously preserved ensemble of colonial-era architecture, most notably the Sultan Abdul Samad Building (completed in 1897), which exemplifies Indo-Saracenic design and once housed key British administrative offices. Together, these structures and the open civic space of the square form a living monument that encapsulates Malaysia's colonial past, struggle for sovereignty, and post-independence nation-building narrative.

Despite its historical prominence, contemporary engagement with Dataran Merdeka remains largely superficial. Visitor observations and preliminary field assessments indicate that many tourists perceive the site primarily as a photographic backdrop or a transit point rather than a space for historical reflection and cultural learning. The existing interpretation systems such as static informational plaques, limited multilingual signage, and sporadic guided tours often fail to contextualize the architectural evolution, the socio-political milestones, and the community's ongoing relationship with the heritage space. Concurrently, the rapid commercialization of surrounding zones, coupled with urban development pressures, poses a dual challenge: preserving architectural authenticity while ensuring that heritage tourism remains economically inclusive and socially meaningful for local stakeholders, including micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), licensed guides, trishaw operators, and street vendors.

In response to these challenges, higher education institutions are increasingly adopting Service Learning as a pedagogical and community-engagement strategy. Service Learning is an experiential educational approach that intentionally integrates meaningful community service with academic instruction and structured reflection. Rooted in constructivist learning theory and civic education principles, it emphasizes reciprocal benefit: students apply theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts, while communities gain capacity-building support, enhanced public awareness, and sustainable development initiatives. In Malaysia, this approach is institutionalized through the Service Learning University for Society (SULAM) framework, which mandates universities to foster social responsibility, cultural literacy, and collaborative problem-solving with local communities.

The purpose of this Service Learning program at Dataran Merdeka is multifaceted and strategically aligned with heritage conservation, tourism enhancement, and academic development. Specifically, the program aims to:

1. Enhance Historical and Cultural Literacy: Equip students with a deep, evidence-based understanding of Malaysia's independence history, colonial architectural heritage, and contemporary heritage management practices through direct field engagement, archival exploration, and expert interaction.
2. Strengthen Community Capacity and Stakeholder Collaboration: Empower local vendors, tour guides, and heritage custodians by co-developing accessible, contextually relevant educational materials (e.g., heritage storytelling scripts, QR-based interpretive guides, and visitor engagement modules) that improve historical interpretation and foster active community participation in heritage dissemination.



3. Promote Sustainable Heritage Tourism: Foster a balanced approach between conservation and commercialization by documenting visitor behavior, assessing spatial utilization, and proposing community-informed strategies to mitigate over-commercialization, manage crowd flow, and support local livelihoods without compromising historical authenticity.
4. Enrich Academic Curriculum and Research: Generate empirical field data, case-based learning materials, and structured reflective insights that can be integrated into university courses on heritage tourism, urban studies, and community-based development, thereby bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application.

By situating the Service Learning initiative within the Dataran Merdeka context, this article demonstrates how university-community partnerships can transform heritage sites from passive tourist attractions into dynamic spaces for education, civic pride, and sustainable local development. The program not only addresses gaps in historical interpretation and stakeholder coordination but also cultivates a new generation of socially responsible graduates who view heritage preservation as both a cultural imperative and a shared economic opportunity. Ultimately, this initiative seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive heritage management, offering a replicable model for academic institutions, tourism authorities, and community actors engaged in safeguarding Malaysia's urban cultural landscapes.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This service-learning activity involved 36 students and 2 supervising lecturers from STIE Pembangunan Tanjungpinang. The program was conducted at Dataran Merdeka, Kuala Lumpur, on 7 November 2025, utilizing a participatory approach that actively engages community members, local stakeholders, and learners in all phases from planning and implementation to evaluation (Satriadi, 2025).

The program was executed through the following stages:

1. Planning and Initial Consultation

At this stage, students held intensive discussions with Harriston Chocolate staff to identify business needs, strategic issues, and community service program objectives. Consultations were held to ensure alignment between industry needs and the activities to be carried out by the students. In addition, initial observations were made of various chocolate products on the market, such as dark chocolate, milk chocolate, tiramisu, durian, curry, and ruby chocolate variants. The presentation on the variety of products helped students understand the characteristics of Harriston Chocolate's premium products and the cultural values attached to several Malaysian specialties.

2. Field Learning Activities

At this stage, students are directly involved in gaining a comprehensive understanding of chocolate products, innovation processes, and company operational standards. Students also receive structured explanations from Harriston Chocolate staff regarding the chocolate production process, from raw material processing to finished products. This activity reflects Morris (2020) principle of experiential learning, which emphasizes that deep understanding is formed through direct experience and active involvement in real processes.

3. Student Interaction with Staff

In this phase, students engage in discussions with store staff to understand the production process, quality standards, and operational challenges faced by Harriston Chocolate. Students receive direct explanations from staff on how to manage product quality, handle customers, and implement service strategies in the company's daily operations. The two-way discussions provide insights into business practices, operational dynamics, and aspects of professionalism that are very important in the creative industry sector. This interaction also helps students develop communication and service competencies.



4. Brief Evaluation and Reflection

This final stage involves gathering feedback from staff and customers regarding the implementation of the program and the contribution of students during the activity. Based on this input, students reflect on their experiences and evaluate the effectiveness of the service learning activities and their impact on educational activities and product innovation development in the store. The results of this evaluation form the basis for formulating improvements and developing similar activities in the future so that the program can provide optimal benefits for industry partners.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION



Figure 1. Dataran Merdeka and the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, Kuala Lumpur

Observations revealed several key characteristics that define Dataran Merdeka's historical, architectural, and functional significance:

1. History and Physical Characteristics

Dataran Merdeka was originally a British administrative and recreational ground during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The adjacent Sultan Abdul Samad Building, designed by A.C. Norman and A.B. Hubback, showcases distinctive Indo-Saracenic architecture with Moorish arches, copper domes, and a prominent clock tower. Historical records indicate that the square was meticulously planned to serve as a ceremonial space, culminating in its role as the site of Malaya's independence proclamation in 1957. The surrounding structures, including the Royal Selangor Club and KL City Gallery, reflect layered colonial and post-colonial urban development.

2. Status as a National Heritage Site

Under Malaysia's National Heritage Act 2005, Dataran Merdeka and its adjacent buildings are legally protected as national heritage assets. Any structural modification or redevelopment requires approval from heritage authorities to preserve architectural authenticity. The square's designation reinforces its role as a living monument of national identity rather than a static historical relic.

3. Function as a Civic and Tourism Hub

Today, Dataran Merdeka operates as a multifunctional public space. It hosts the annual Merdeka Day parade, cultural festivals, and community gatherings. On weekends, vehicle access is restricted to create a pedestrian-friendly environment, encouraging leisurely exploration, photography, and engagement with local vendors. Street sellers offer traditional snacks, handicrafts, and KL-themed souvenirs, contributing to local livelihoods while enhancing the visitor experience.

4. Supporting Infrastructure and Urban Integration

The square is seamlessly integrated into Kuala Lumpur's urban fabric, with proximity to public transit, riverfront walkways, and contemporary cultural institutions. Historical interpretation panels, guided tour kiosks, and interactive displays have been introduced to improve historical literacy, though



visitor feedback indicates a need for more engaging, multilingual, and youth-oriented educational materials.

The service-learning visit provided participants with direct exposure to Malaysia's independence history, colonial architectural heritage, and contemporary heritage management practices. Students observed how colonial-era spaces have been repurposed for civic education, tourism, and economic activity, reinforcing the understanding that heritage conservation must balance authenticity, public access, and community livelihoods.



Figure 2. Students Conducting Service Learning Activities at Dataran Merdeka

Based on the images above, several key findings were identified that illustrate the architectural characteristics, historical background, and functional role of the area as a heritage tourism destination. The documentation also captures the active participation of 36 students from STIE Pembangunan Tanjungpinang in the Service Learning program conducted on November 7, 2025.

The Service Learning activity at Dataran Merdeka involved students from STIE Pembangunan Tanjungpinang in a comprehensive heritage education program. The students, wearing their official university jackets and lanyards, conducted structured learning activities around the Sultan Abdul Samad Building and the Merdeka Square area. The program was part of the "Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN) Internasional" (International Community Service Program), demonstrating the institution's commitment to experiential learning and cross-cultural engagement.

During the field activities, students engaged in multiple learning tasks:

1. Architectural Documentation and Analysis

Students systematically documented the Indo-Saracenic architectural features of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, including its distinctive Moorish arches, copper-domed towers, and the iconic 41.2-meter clock tower. Through direct observation, they analyzed how British colonial architecture was adapted to the tropical Malaysian climate, noting design elements such as high ceilings, ventilation systems, and ornamental details that reflect both European and Islamic architectural influences.

2. Historical Contextualization

Guided by heritage officers and licensed tour guides, students learned about the historical significance of Dataran Merdeka as the site where Malaya's independence was proclaimed on August 31, 1957. They examined the exact location where the Union Jack was lowered and the Malayan flag was raised for the first time, connecting theoretical knowledge of Malaysian history with tangible spatial markers.

3. Visitor Behavior Observation

Students conducted systematic observations of tourist interactions within the heritage zone. They documented visitor flow patterns, peak visiting hours, photography hotspots, and the ways



tourists engage with historical interpretation materials. This activity provided empirical data on how heritage sites function as both educational spaces and recreational destinations.

4. Community and MSME Engagement

The students interacted with local vendors, trishaw operators, souvenir shop owners, and food stall operators around Dataran Merdeka. Through these interactions, they gained insights into how heritage tourism generates economic opportunities for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Students documented the types of products sold, pricing strategies, customer demographics, and the challenges faced by local entrepreneurs in balancing commercial activities with heritage conservation requirements.

5. Participatory Photography and Digital Documentation

As part of the Service Learning methodology, students created visual documentation of the heritage site, capturing architectural details, spatial configurations, conservation conditions, and visitor activities. This photographic evidence serves as a valuable resource for academic analysis, future curriculum development, and potential heritage education materials for local stakeholders.

6. Reflective Group Discussions

Following field observations, students participated in structured group discussions facilitated by supervising lecturers. These sessions allowed participants to share findings, analyze the relationship between heritage preservation and economic development, and formulate recommendations for improving historical interpretation and community engagement at Dataran Merdeka.

The presence of students from STIE Pembangunan Tanjungpinang at this iconic heritage site demonstrates the institution's commitment to international experiential learning and cross-cultural understanding. The Service Learning program not only enhanced students' knowledge of Malaysian colonial history and heritage management but also developed their analytical skills, cultural sensitivity, and social responsibility as future professionals in the fields of economics, tourism, and community development.

Through this immersive experience, students witnessed firsthand how Dataran Merdeka functions as a living heritage site that balances historical preservation, civic education, tourism promotion, and local economic empowerment. The activity reinforced the understanding that heritage conservation is not merely about protecting old buildings but about sustaining cultural identity, fostering community pride, and creating inclusive economic opportunities for local stakeholders.

Discussion

The service-learning experience at Dataran Merdeka highlights its strategic role as a national heritage site that successfully intertwines historical symbolism, civic function, and local economic activity. As a former British administrative ground transformed into the cradle of Malaysian independence, the square embodies both architectural heritage and collective national memory. This aligns with scholarly perspectives that heritage preservation must integrate historical significance, social relevance, and economic sustainability to remain dynamic and community-centric (Burley & Worden, 2003; Teo et al., 2014).

Legal protection under the National Heritage Act 2005 ensures that structural integrity and historical authenticity are prioritized. Unlike commercialized tourist zones, Dataran Merdeka is managed with an emphasis on national education and civic pride. However, the influx of tourists and weekend crowds creates demand for informal economic activities, including street vending, trishaw rides, and photography services. These activities, while economically beneficial, require coordinated regulation to prevent visual clutter and preserve the site's solemn historical character (Azlan & Bagul, 2010; Hassan et al., 2014).

Student observations confirmed that visitor engagement extends beyond passive sightseeing. Tourists interact with heritage guides, participate in photo documentation, purchase local products, and attend cultural performances. This behavioral pattern supports findings that heritage tourism stimulates micro-enterprise growth and enhances tourist retention (Chek et al., 2024; Othman, 2010).



The weekend pedestrianization policy further amplifies economic circulation while improving visitor comfort and safety.

For students, the program served as a practice-based learning platform that deepened their understanding of national history, colonial architecture, and heritage governance. Direct interaction with guides, vendors, and site managers enhanced their analytical, communication, and observational skills while fostering awareness of conservation challenges. For organizers, the activity generated valuable field data, strengthened academic-community partnerships, and provided authentic case material for curriculum development.

Long-term sustainability requires collaborative policies that align heritage conservation with inclusive economic development. While current management practices effectively balance preservation and public use, continuous stakeholder dialogue, upgraded interpretation systems, and community-led heritage education are essential to safeguard Dataran Merdeka's authenticity amid urban growth and tourism commercialization.

4. CONCLUSION

Dataran Merdeka stands as one of Malaysia's most significant historical and architectural landmarks, symbolizing the nation's journey to independence and its colonial-era urban heritage. Originally developed as a British administrative and ceremonial ground, the square was forever transformed on 31 August 1957 into the birthplace of national sovereignty. Today, protected under national heritage legislation, it functions as a civic space, educational site, and tourism hub that continues to shape Kuala Lumpur's cultural identity.

The area serves a dual role: preserving historical memory while fostering local economic activity through MSMEs, guided tours, and weekend pedestrian commerce. The service-learning program demonstrated that heritage tourism, when managed participatively, can enhance historical literacy, empower local communities, and enrich student learning. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding the risk of over-commercialization, inconsistent historical interpretation, and the need for sustainable crowd and vendor management.

Limitations of this study include its narrow geographic focus, reliance on qualitative observation, and short-duration fieldwork, which restrict quantitative economic analysis and year-round tourism pattern assessment. Future research should incorporate comparative studies with other heritage sites in Kuala Lumpur, engage policy stakeholders, and develop metrics to evaluate the socio-economic impact of heritage tourism more comprehensively.

Ultimately, Dataran Merdeka's preservation requires a collaborative approach that aligns government regulation, community participation, and educational outreach. Through service-learning initiatives, universities, local enterprises, and heritage managers can co-create sustainable models that honor historical authenticity while supporting inclusive urban development.

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