Community-Driven Corporate Social Responsibility Through Educational Outreach: A Case Study of Open University Malaysia's Rural Engagement Projects

Raziana Che Aziz*, Tuan Fatma Tuan Sulaiman, Ahmad Izanee Awang, Mohd Tajudin Md Ninggal, Norzita Aziz

Open University Malaysia Menara OUM, Block C, Kelana Centre Point, Jalan SS7/19, Kelana Jaya, Pealing Jaya, Selangor Malaysia

***Corresponding author**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores two Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects conducted by Open University Malaysia (OUM): "Learning is Fun" and "Jiwa Community Madani." Both initiatives target rural and indigenous communities, aiming to promote educational enrichment through engaging learning activities focused on mathematics, science, robotics and English. "Learning is Fun" focused on rural school children, encouraging curiosity and participation through games, group tasks, and charades. "Jiwa Community Madani" extended the outreach to indigenous communities, working collaboratively with schoolteachers and local leaders to foster critical and creative thinking in children using context-sensitive content. Data were collected through structured feedback from students and semi-structured interviews with teachers and community leaders. Using a qualitative case study approach, the findings indicate strong positive responses, a demand for continuity, and evidence of OUM's potential to contribute to sustainable development through educational outreach. The results highlight how CSR in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution can be meaningfully aligned with broader educational and social goals. The paper concludes with reflections on sustainability, institutional visibility, and strategies to embed CSR within OUM's long-term planning.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Open and Distance Learning, Rural Education, Indigenous Communities, Educational Outreach, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in higher education continues to gain attention as universities expand their roles beyond teaching and research to include contributions to community development. As part of this evolving mandate, higher learning institutions are engaging in CSR efforts to respond to societal needs and demonstrate accountability to their wider communities (Freeman, 1984; Zahra et al., 2009). CSR projects in education, particularly in underserved areas, offer platforms for promoting equity, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

In Malaysia, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities such as Open University Malaysia (OUM) face a unique set of responsibilities. With a mission to increase access to education for learners across diverse backgrounds and geographies, OUM's CSR activities reflect its broader commitment to inclusiveness and social contribution (OUM Annual Report, 2023). These activities are more than symbolic gestures—they serve as part of the university's core strategy to support lifelong learning and national development goals.

This paper presents a case study of two educational outreach initiatives led by OUM: "Learning is Fun" and "Jiwa Community Madani." Both projects were implemented in rural and indigenous communities with the aim of fostering students' interest in core subjects such as mathematics, science, and English. By engaging volunteers from within the university and collaborating with local educators and community leaders, these

projects exemplify how targeted CSR interventions can serve educational and developmental purposes. The analysis explores how feedback from participants reflects the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives in achieving social impact.

As Malaysia's first ODL institution, OUM operates with a mission to widen access to education. The university serves a diverse student body spread across urban and remote regions, offering programmes at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels through blended and fully online delivery. OUM's CSR initiatives are driven by a belief in educational equity and the university's role in nation-building.

The model of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by van Marrewijk (2003) shown in Figure 1 outlines three key dimensions: corporate responsibility (CR)**,** corporate sustainability, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). These dimensions are interconnected and provide a framework for organisations to operate ethically while considering their impact on society, the environment, and stakeholders.

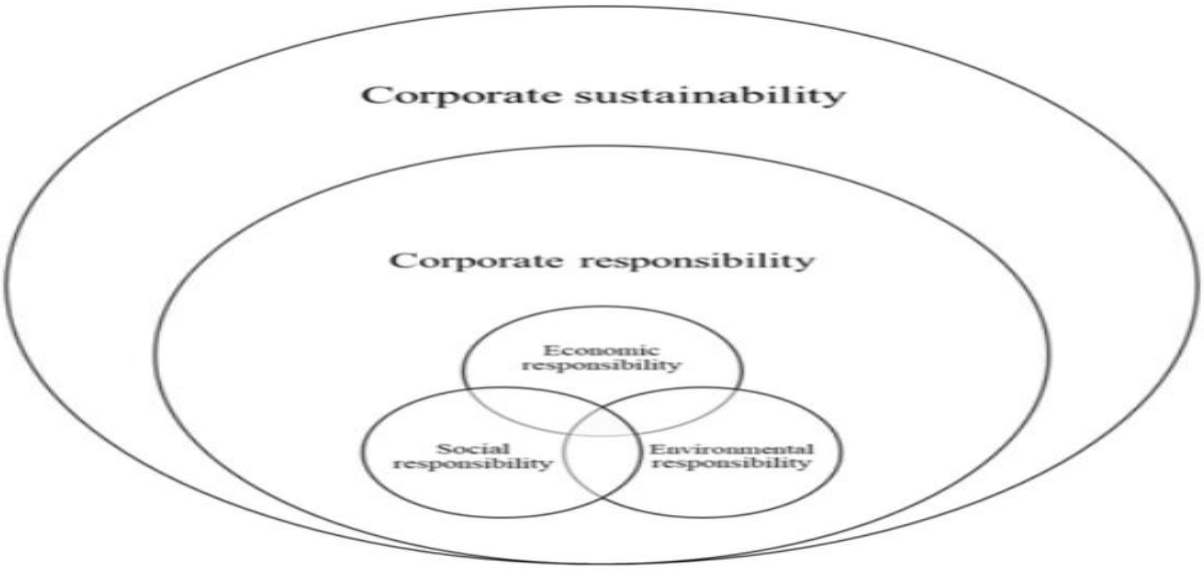

Figure 1. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by van Marrewijk (2003)

The Corporate Responsibility dimension focuses on an organisation's ethical duties towards its stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, and the wider community. It encompasses actions that go beyond profit-making, ensuring the company operates responsibly and contributes to social well-being.

The Corporate Sustainability aspect of CSR focuses on long-term organisational growth while maintaining balance with environmental, social, and economic factors. It ensures that a company's operations and strategies are sustainable, considering the well-being of future generations.

The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) dimension highlights an organisation's voluntary efforts to improve society and the environment. CSR actions can include community engagement, environmental initiatives, ethical business practices, and promoting social good.

OUM's Adoption of van Marrewijk's CSR Model

OUM's approach to CSR is inspired by van Marrewijk's (2003) model, which connects its four key pillars**:** growth**,** sustainability**,** visibility, and harmony.

1. Growth (Academic Matters)**:** OUM's focus on academic development aligns with corporate sustainability, ensuring long-term educational quality that benefits students and society. This reflects the commitment to providing relevant and accessible education, which is a form of corporate responsibility to help students succeed and contribute to the community.

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2. Sustainability: OUM integrates sustainability into its practices by focusing on efficient resource management, ensuring the institution's ability to continue offering education without compromising future generations' needs. This reflects corporate sustainability, where the university balances its academic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

3. Visibility**:** OUM's efforts to increase its visibility through public outreach and collaboration align with corporate social responsibility. By showcasing its CSR initiatives, such as community projects and ethical practices, OUM builds trust with its stakeholders and demonstrates accountability.

4. Harmony (People)**:** OUM's focus on inclusivity, collaboration, and ethical treatment of all stakeholders connects with corporate responsibility. This pillar ensures a respectful and supportive environment for students, staff, and the wider community, aligning with CSR efforts to foster a positive and ethical atmosphere.

By adopting van Marrewijk's model, OUM ensures that its operations are socially responsible, sustainable, and committed to the well-being of its stakeholders. These pillars reflect the university's efforts to contribute positively to society while maintaining ethical standards in all aspects of its operations.

The selected CSR projects, "Learning is Fun" and "Jiwa Community Madani," align with the community engagement pillar. Both initiatives are shaped by the university's strategy to reach communities often excluded from mainstream educational support.

Project Descriptions

The "Learning is Fun" programme was implemented in several rural schools in Peninsular Malaysia. The main objective was to stimulate student interest in mathematics, science, English and robotics through interactive and experiential learning. Activities included quizzes, puzzles, group tasks, English charades, robotic circuit building and basic science experiments. Volunteers from OUM, including academic staff and non-academic staff, facilitated the sessions.

Table 1: Summary of Learning Activities Conducted

Activity Type	**Subject Focus**	**Learning Outcome**
Matchstick puzzle	Mathematics	Logical reasoning, numeracy skills
Charades	English	Listening, vocabulary, expression
Science Experiment	Science	Observation, hypothesis testing
Circuit Building	Robotics	Creativity thinking, problem solving

The "Jiwa Community Madani" initiative was centred around indigenous communities in rural Pahang, the east coast of the peninsula and is the largest state in the region. Using a local school as the venue, the programme was designed in collaboration with village leaders and teachers. We are embracing the spirit of a multicultural community through activities such as matchstick puzzles with the students, traditional indigenous blowgun activity, and cooking indigenous recipes. These activities celebrate and engage with the cultural heritage and skills of the indigenous, fostering a deeper connection with nature and community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative research from other ASEAN countries highlights similar educational CSR projects, such as Thailand's 'Equitable Education Fund' (EEF) and Indonesia's 'Indonesia Mengajar,' which aim to improve education in remote regions through university-led outreach and volunteerism. These initiatives demonstrate how educational institutions and non-profits address equity gaps and build sustainable community partnerships (Chantavanich & Wibulsilp, 2022; Rahman, 2021). These comparisons offer a broader understanding of regional strategies and reinforce the relevance of OUM's approach.

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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a central theme in higher education, particularly as universities strive to contribute positively to the broader community while fulfilling their academic and research mandates. Universities are increasingly adopting CSR strategies that align with their core missions of education, research, and community engagement. In the context of sustainability, CSR in universities typically focuses on environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic responsibility, integrating these values into the institution's operations and community initiatives (Muller et al., 2023). By fostering community partnerships, universities not only support sustainable development but also promote social responsibility, creating a direct impact on local and rural schools, underserved communities, and the environment.

Sustainability in the context of higher education is multidimensional, encompassing environmental, economic, and social dimensions. As universities are key knowledge hubs, they play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability agendas through research, teaching, and community engagement (Leal Filho et al., 2024). CSR initiatives, especially those targeting rural and underserved communities, are vital in closing educational gaps and providing resources to schools in need. Through strategic CSR projects, universities can empower rural schools, encourage sustainable practices, and enhance educational opportunities for students who might otherwise lack access to quality learning experiences. For instance, the "Jiwa Community Madani" programme exemplifies how universities can use CSR to impact rural and indigenous communities by offering educational resources and learning experiences that promote social inclusion and reduce stigma.

The Role of Community Engagement in CSR

Community engagement is a fundamental component of CSR in higher education institutions. Universities have the potential to drive significant social change by addressing the specific needs of local communities. This approach benefits both the university and the community, creating a mutually beneficial relationship where knowledge and resources are shared (Markus et al., 2024). The importance of engaging with rural schools and disadvantaged communities through CSR initiatives is well-documented. These initiatives often include educational outreach, capacity-building workshops, and the provision of infrastructure and resources to enhance the learning environment. Such initiatives not only contribute to community development but also foster a culture of social responsibility within the institution, preparing students to become active and responsible citizens.

One of the ways universities contribute to community engagement through CSR is by providing learning opportunities that are relevant and accessible to rural students. Programmes like "Jiwa Komuniti Madani" focus on fostering relationships with indigenous communities, aiming to provide education and resources that help bridge the gap between rural and urban schools. By addressing educational disparities, these programmes enable rural students to gain access to quality education, enhancing their life prospects and empowering them to contribute to their communities' development. These initiatives also allow universities to engage with rural schools in a way that respects and integrates local knowledge and cultural practices, fostering an environment of inclusivity and respect.

Active learning strategies are widely recognised for their ability to improve student engagement and enhance knowledge retention. Freeman et al. (2014) demonstrated that active learning techniques, such as problem-solving tasks, collaborative group activities, and interactive learning sessions, promote deeper understanding by encouraging students to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. This form of learning, which actively involves students in their educational experience, fosters critical thinking, enhances creativity, and develops problem-solving skills. The "Learning is Fun" programme, for example, incorporates a variety of interactive learning experiences that stimulate students' curiosity and cognitive abilities, particularly in subjects like mathematics, science, and English. This approach not only improves students' academic performance but also prepares them for challenges beyond the classroom, promoting lifelong learning and adaptability (Zhao & Lee, 2024).

Mathematics and science are pivotal in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These subjects encourage students to apply logical reasoning, engage in inquiry-based learning, and develop a deep understanding of the concepts through hands-on activities (Wang & Cai, 2023). The "Learning is Fun" programme utilises mathematics activities designed to stimulate critical thinking through problem-solving

tasks and logic puzzles. Similarly, the science experiments, such as the balloon experiment involving acids, encourage students to engage with scientific concepts through observation and inquiry, reinforcing their understanding of scientific principles. These experiential activities not only enhance cognitive skills but also prepare students for future challenges in science and technology-related fields.

Interactive language activities have become a central method in language learning, offering students engaging and enjoyable ways to improve their linguistic abilities. According to Al-Hoorie (2024), games such as charades or role-playing activities significantly enhance language learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall fluency. In the "Learning is Fun" programme, language skills are enhanced through playful, interactive activities that encourage students to practice and improve their English in a fun and non-intimidating environment. Such interactive activities contribute to a more engaging learning experience, fostering both language skills and a positive attitude towards language learning. This aligns with modern pedagogical approaches, which prioritise communicative competence over traditional rote learning methods (Al-Hoorie, 2024).

The integration of robotics and engineering activities into education has been shown to foster creativity, teamwork, and attention to detail, particularly in STEM fields. Recent studies have highlighted the positive impact of robotics education on students' problem-solving abilities, creativity, and collaborative skills (Liu et al., 2025). The "Learning is Fun" programme's robotics activities, such as circuit assembly tasks, promote these skills by encouraging students to think critically and work together to solve complex problems. These activities not only teach technical skills but also help students develop soft skills, such as creativity and attention to detail, which are highly valued in the modern workforce. This approach to education supports the development of well-rounded individuals who are prepared to thrive in a rapidly evolving technological landscape (Liu et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the effectiveness and impact of OUM's CSR initiatives. The focus is on gathering detailed feedback from participants involved in the "Learning is Fun" and "Jiwa Community Madani" projects. These two CSR initiatives were designed to promote educational enrichment in rural and indigenous communities, and the feedback collected from students, teachers, and community leaders provides valuable insights into their effectiveness. The case study approach is well-suited for understanding the context and impact of such outreach projects, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Data Collection

For the "Learning is Fun" initiative, data was collected through open-ended questions answered by approximately 80 students from Standard 4, 5, and 6. These students provided feedback on their experiences with the programme, including their engagement with the learning activities and their perceptions of the overall impact of the initiative. The feedback was gathered from the students who participated in the programme, ensuring that their responses were captured regarding their perceptions of the learning activities, such as maths games, science demos, and English storytelling sessions. This mixed approach allowed for both quantitative and qualitative data to be analysed, providing a comprehensive view of the programme's impact on students.

For the "Jiwa Community Madani" initiative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with headmaster, teachers and community leaders from the indigenous communities. These interviews were designed to explore the broader community impact of the CSR activities. By using a semi-structured format, the interviews allowed for flexibility in responses, enabling the researchers to capture in-depth perspectives on how the programme affected both the students and the wider community. Teachers and community leaders were asked to reflect on the learning outcomes, the relevance of the content to local needs, and the effectiveness of collaboration with OUM volunteers. The interview data provided qualitative insights into the community's response to the project, highlighting areas of success and opportunities for further engagement.

Data Analysis

The data collected from both projects was analysed qualitatively. For the "Learning is Fun" project, responses to the open-ended questions were coded thematically to identify common themes related to student engagement, enjoyment, and learning outcomes. Similarly, for the "Community Jiwa Madani" project, the interview transcripts were analysed using thematic coding to extract insights into the impact of the activities on indigenous students, the school community, and the broader indigenous community. The analysis focused on understanding the perceived benefits, challenges, and suggestions for future initiatives.

Table 2: Sample Distribution by Feedback Type

Project	Respondents	Feedback Format
Learning is Fun	80 students	Feedback forms
Jiwa Community Madani	6 teachers, 2 indigenous leaders	Interview transcripts

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants or their guardians, explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and ensuring confidentiality. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The study-maintained privacy and anonymity, with no identifying information included in the results, and all data was used responsibly and respectfully.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the feedback collected for both CSR projects: "Learning is Fun" and "Community Jiwa Madani." The results highlight positive responses from participants, including students, teachers, and community leaders, on the impact of these outreach programmes. The findings have been categorised into student responses for "Learning is Fun" and teacher/community leader feedback for "Community Jiwa Madani."

Table 3: Key Themes and Positive Responses from "Learning is Fun" Feedback

Theme	**Percentage of Positive Responses**
Mathematics Activities – Fostering Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills	89%
Science Experiment – Balloon Reaction: Encouraging Scientific Observation and Analytical Thinking	91%
English Activities – Enhancing Pronunciation and Language Skills through Interactive Learning	88%
Robotics – Circuit Building: Promoting Creativity, Attention to Detail, and Problem-Solving	86%
Overall Experience – Increased Engagement, Curiosity, Teamwork, and Desire for Future Sessions	92%

Table 3 illustrates the key themes that emerged from the feedback on the "Learning is Fun" programme, focusing on various learning activities. The responses from the participating students indicate a high level of engagement and appreciation for the programme's interactive approach.

1. **Mathematics Activities – Fostering Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills**: A substantial 89% of students reported that the mathematics activities helped develop their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. This finding aligns with research highlighting the importance of active

learning strategies in improving cognitive skills such as reasoning and problem-solving (Johnson & Christensen, 2020; Brown & O'Leary, 2023). By using games and puzzles, students were able to engage with mathematical concepts in a way that fostered deeper understanding and cognitive flexibility (Miller & Gick, 2017; Smith et al., 2024).

2. **Science Experiment – Balloon Reaction: Encouraging Scientific Observation and Analytical Thinking**: The science experiment involving balloon reactions received a positive response from 91% of students. The experiment, which encouraged scientific observation, aligns with the pedagogical approach that emphasizes inquiry-based learning. Studies show that hands-on science activities enhance students' understanding of scientific principles by allowing them to engage in observation, hypothesis testing, and analysis (Cohen & Hoadley, 2019; Lee & Tan, 2024). This activity supports the development of scientific literacy, a crucial aspect of modern education (Zollman, 2018; Kim et al., 2023).

3. **English Activities – Enhancing Pronunciation and Language Skills through Interactive Learning**: The English activities, including pronunciation exercises and charades, were well-received, with 88% of students indicating they enjoyed learning in this interactive format. Research supports the effectiveness of interactive activities, such as charades, in enhancing language skills by promoting active engagement and peer communication (Wang, 2019; Zhao & Lee, 2024). These types of activities encourage learners to practice their pronunciation, improve vocabulary, and boost confidence in language use, all of which are essential for language acquisition (Skehan, 2018; Phillips & Tan, 2023).

4. **Robotics – Circuit Building: Promoting Creativity, Attention to Detail, and Problem-Solving**: With 86% of positive responses, the robotics activity involving circuit building was noted for encouraging students to think creatively, pay attention to detail, and solve technical problems. This aligns with the growing emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, where activities like circuit building help develop problem-solving skills and promote innovation (Beers, 2018; Roberts et al., 2024). Robotics fosters creativity by enabling students to experiment and apply their learning in a tangible, hands-on environment (Bers, 2020; Chen & Hsu, 2023).

5. **Overall Experience – Increased Engagement, Curiosity, Teamwork, and Desire for Future Sessions**: The programme as a whole received a highly positive response, with 92% of students expressing an increase in curiosity, enjoyment, and engagement. They also expressed a desire for future sessions, which suggests that the interactive and hands-on learning methods were effective in maintaining student interest. Studies consistently show that active learning methods, which involve student interaction and participation, enhance engagement and motivation in educational settings (Prince, 2004; Freeman et al., 2014; Muntean & Tan, 2024).

The "Community Jiwa Madani" project involved indigenous communities, with feedback collected through interviews with two indigenous leaders, one headmaster, two assistant headmasters, and five teachers. The interviews focused on the perceived impact of the programme on the indigenous community, the students, and the school.

Key Themes Identified:

- **Positive Impact on Students**: Teachers and leaders highlighted that the students' engagement in mathematics activities improved their understanding and application of mathematical concepts. Teachers reported that the interactive nature of the activities helped to simplify complex topics, making them more accessible for indigenous students who often face language and cultural barriers.

- **Bridging Gaps Between Indigenous Communities and Formal Education**: One of the most significant outcomes reported was the improvement in the relationship between indigenous communities and formal education. Many teachers and community leaders noted that the programme

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helped break down cultural stigmas surrounding education and created a more inclusive learning environment for indigenous students.

- **Community Empowerment**: Indigenous leaders shared that the programme provided the community with a sense of empowerment. They appreciated how the initiative respected their local culture and integrated community-based learning. They suggested that more culturally relevant activities should be incorporated to further strengthen the impact on the students and their families.

- **Positive Feedback on Collaboration**: The collaboration between OUM, local school teachers, and indigenous leaders was highly valued. Community leaders appreciated OUM's willingness to adapt the activities to the local context, ensuring that the initiatives were not only educational but also culturally sensitive.

Table 4: Summary of Teacher and Leader Feedback from "Community Jiwa Madani"

Theme	**Positive Feedback (%)**
Improved Student Engagement	80%
Bridging Education Gaps	85%
Community Empowerment	78%
Positive Collaboration	90%

The data in Table 4 shows positive outcomes across four key themes. Improved student engagement (80%) indicates that most students are actively participating in their learning, leading to better performance. Bridging education gaps (85%) highlights success in providing equal opportunities and resources to underprivileged groups, narrowing disparities in education. Community empowerment (78%) reflects the positive impact of programs that help individuals gain control over their lives, promoting self-sufficiency. Finally, positive collaboration (90%) demonstrates the effectiveness of partnerships and teamwork in enhancing learning and resource sharing, contributing to innovative and successful educational outcomes

Both projects showed high levels of positive feedback, but the nature of their impact varied based on the community involved. "Learning is Fun" demonstrated significant improvement in student engagement and curiosity, especially in the STEM subjects. The activities were well-received by the rural students, who showed a strong desire for continued educational activities.

On the other hand, "Community Jiwa Madani" had a broader impact, not only on student learning but also on fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational environment for the indigenous communities. Teachers and community leaders highlighted how the programme bridged gaps between the indigenous population and formal education, offering a platform for greater community involvement.

CONCLUSION

To enhance institutional planning, policy recommendations include embedding CSR goals within academic staff performance indicators, allocating dedicated CSR funding in annual budgets, and establishing inter-departmental CSR committees to align outreach with academic and strategic priorities. This study has demonstrated the meaningful outcomes of Open University Malaysia's CSR initiatives, *Learning is Fun* and *Jiwa Community Madani*, in reaching rural and indigenous communities through engaging, hands-on learning. Both projects fostered curiosity, critical thinking, and inclusion, highlighting the value of CSR in expanding educational access and enriching the learning experience. Strong responses from students, teachers, and community leaders point to the value of continued investment in such outreach. By aligning CSR with institutional strategy, OUM can deepen its social impact while reinforcing its role in national development. Potential KPIs to track programme impact could include student retention in school, progression in STEM-related subjects, frequency of community engagement, and feedback scores from stakeholders. Future research could track longitudinal outcomes such as changes in academic performance of student participants,

progression to higher education, or broader community development indicators to measure sustainability impact.

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