



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



ISSN: 2222-6990

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i6/13949>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i6/13949

**Received:** 14 April 2022, **Revised:** 17 May 2022, **Accepted:** 26 May 2022

**Published Online:** 04 June 2022

**In-Text Citation:** (Mohamad et al., 2022)

**To Cite this Article:** Mohamad, A. K., Khalid, F., & Jamil, N. A. (2022). Co-curriculum Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic and their Implications towards Soft Skills. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 12(6), 39 – 51.

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Vol. 12, No. 6, 2022, Pg. 39 – 51

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## Co-curriculum Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic and their Implications towards Soft Skills

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### Abstract

Co-curricular activities are essentially to ensure the achievement of co-curricular objectives. Students' participation in these activities provides experience for them to enhance their soft skills. This study was conducted to examine the impact of students' involvement in co-curricular activities on their soft skills. This study involved 248 students from one secondary school in Kuala Lumpur. The data was collected using a set of questionnaires. The findings show a moderate level of students' involvement in the co-curricular activities. The findings also indicate a moderate level of acquisition of the soft skills. The results reveal that there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of their level of involvement and soft skills acquisition. This study also shows that students' involvement in the co-curricular activities make a small positive contribution toward students' level of mastery of soft skills. In conclusion, it is crucial for all stakeholders to brainstorm the best solution to ensure that co-curricular activities implemented at the school level positively impact on students' mastery of soft skills, which are not essential skills to master.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Co-curriculum Activities, Soft Skills.

### Introduction

It is compulsory for every student in school in Malaysia, as well as students at higher education institutions, to be involved in co-curricular activities (Badusah et al., 2014). This policy was implemented by the Ministry of Education in Malaysia to develop students holistically along intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions, as reflected in the National Education Philosophy. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 has proven that these efforts are focused and constantly enhanced to ensure that the country is able to produce excellent human capital to drive the development and prosperity of the nation.

It is compulsory for students to be involved in at least one co-curricular activity, according to the 1 Student 1 Sport (1M1S) policy. The implementation of 1M1S demonstrates that co-curricular activities are one of the crucial elements in the national education transformational agenda. Throughout the year, students' curricular achievements are

measured through School-based Assessments, while the achievement of co-curricular activities is evaluated through Physical Activity, Sports and Co-curriculum Assessments. All these assessments report students' involvement in activities throughout the year (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2012).

Co-curricular activities are a medium that nurtures additional value for students to enhance their personality. In higher education institutions, co-curricular activities play a role as an agent to mould students' soft skills. Soft skills are an important element to be mastered by every university student to ensure their employability. In fact, one of the criteria demanded by employers is candidates with high levels of mastery of soft skills. Thus, a lack of soft skills will most likely lead to a lack of employment opportunities for a graduate (Hazilah et al., 2013). Therefore, soft skills are not something that must only be emphasized for students in higher education institutions, but in fact these skills need to be applied to every student from the secondary school level onwards.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world. This pandemic has caused concern and confusion among the public, as the virus spreads rapidly among the community without any early signs of infection. Shahbudin (2020) emphasized that the outbreak causes problems for all sectors of the country, including the economy, tourism and education (Burhanuddin & Abdi, 2020). To prevent the spread of infection, the Malaysian Government had to restrict all these sectors through the announcement of the Movement Control Order. The government also issued instructions that all educational institutions must be closed during the movement control order Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2020). The learning mode shifted to online learning during that period. Once the situation became stable, the Malaysian National Security Council allowed schools to operate physically again, with strict standard operating procedures based on stages. Starting from 24 June 2020, only students who were sitting for the national examinations were allowed to attend school physically. From 15 July 2020, all students were allowed to go to school for face-to-face learning. In awareness of the importance of co-curricular elements for the development of students, the government allowed sports and co-curricular activities to be conducted in schools from 1 September 2020, as per guidelines instructed by the Ministry of Education.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the patterns of daily life. Throughout this pandemic, adolescents were less actively engaged in physical activity (Zakari & Muhamad, 2021) and only focused on moderate physical activity (Nawang et al., 2021). The pandemic has also changed the landscape of co-curricular activities in schools to the implementation of "new norm" co-curricular activities. The implementation of new norm co-curricular activities is to ensure that students are not left behind in their involvement with co-curricular activities at school. Despite strict standard operating procedures (SOPs), the experience from the involvement with co-curricular activities should be fully utilized by the student so that they can obtain the added value they deserve. This is important, because previous studies have proven that the implementation of co-curricular activities before the COVID-19 pandemic was contributing to the development of students' soft skills in schools (Zulfadli & Saifullizam, 2017). However, the extent to which the new norm co-curricular activities conducted by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute to the development of students' soft skills is still uncertain. Therefore, this study highlights six specific objectives, namely: (1) to identify the level of students' participation in new norm co-curricular activities; (2) to identify the level of mastery in students' soft skills after joining new norm co-curricular activities; (3) to study the differences in the level of participation in new norm co-curricular activities based on gender; (4) to study the differences of mastery in students' soft skills based on gender; (5)

to study the relationship between the level of involvement in new norm co-curricular activities and the level of mastery of students' soft skills; and (6) to study the influence of the level of involvement in new norm co-curricular activities toward the mastery level of students' soft skills.

### New Norm Co-Curricular Activities

Co-curriculum is a complementary element to the curriculum in mainstream national education. Co-curriculum is also an extension of the formal teaching and learning process in the classroom that contributes to positive behavioural changes to the personality and emotions of students (Fazli et al., 2013). Co-curricular activities refer to activities conducted outside the classroom as part of a structured plan to give students the opportunity to (1) add, (2) reinforce, and (3) practice positive values formally and informally throughout their participation (Khairulanam & Norlena, 2020).

Co-curricular activities are considered an important tool to fulfill the ideal aspirations of the national education policy. However, according to Othman and Jasni (2016), if students are given the opportunity to choose whether to engage in co-curriculum, they tend to not engage in such activities. This is due to the perception that curricular activities guarantee a good future, compared to engaging in co-curricular activities. Furthermore, Rodzilsky et al (2001) explain demographic factors such as age, gender and ethnicity as determinants of the level of adolescents' involvement in physical activity. Differences in the level of student involvement in co-curricular activities based on gender are often associated with interest. Male students show higher levels of interest than female students to participate in sports and physical activities conducted at school. Meanwhile, female students only show interest in certain sports and physical activities (Kamal, 2011). Male adolescents also show higher levels of involvement in physical activity than female adolescents (Turconi et al., 2008).

The new norm co-curricular activity is a process of implementing sports and co-curricular activities in schools during the enforcement of the Movement Control Order, which effectively started on 1 September 2020. The implementation of new norm co-curricular activities must be carried out according to the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education as stated in the Guidebook on the Implementation of Sports and Co-curricular Activities in the New Norm (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2020). The lack of physical contact activities causes new norm co-curricular activities to be different from the normal co-curricular activities. Despite these significant differences, the goal is the same, which is to ensure that students' development continuously progresses.

Students' involvement in new norm co-curricular activities must be based on the consent of parents or guardians. In addition, teachers must select appropriate activities to avoid physical contact and use the space proportionately to the number of students. To overcome these challenges, teachers are more likely to lead activities statically in the classroom. Teachers tend to choose to conduct co-curricular activities online. This pandemic is encouraging teachers to be more creative in thinking of the best way to ensure that co-curricular activities positively impact on students. However, the question arises to what extent the implementation of new norm co-curricular activities effectively contributes to the development of students, especially to their soft skills. This is because, through non-contact activities, the element of fun while carrying out practical learning in new norm co-curricular activities is difficult to experience by the students.

### Soft skills

Soft skills are also referred to as generic skills, essential skills, human skills, employability skills, and non-technical skills. Generally, "soft skills" refers to a set of additional non-academic skills that individuals need to master in order to equip themselves with diverse skills. In addition, this skill set focuses on the development of (1) personality, (2) humanity and (3) individual self-skills. These skills are needed by students to excel in various fields, such as work and life (Esman & Mokhtar, 2014).

The development of soft skills takes place significantly at the secondary school level, and soft skills are subsequently polished at the university level (Sidik et al., 2020). The Curriculum Development Unit of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (2001) has outlined eight elements of soft skills that need to be mastered by students, which are (1) communication skills, (2) technological skills, (3) planning skills, (4) teamwork skills, (5) problem solving skills, (6) management skills, including selecting and analyzing information, (7) technical and mathematical thinking skills, and (8) skills in understanding culture. Nevertheless, according to Wilhelm et al (2002), secondary schools are still not fully successful as a place for students to improve their soft skills. Soft skills are often seen to be acquired only through formal teaching in the classroom. However, people seldom realize that participation in co-curricular activities also increases the level of mastery of soft skills among students (Mohamaed, 2014).

Furthermore, soft skills are a set of additional skills that enhance the value added to an individual to become more competent. The mastery of soft skills should be encouraged among students without having to focus only on one gender. A previous study by Shah et al. (2017) shows that there are differences in the level of mastery of soft skills based on gender. These differences thus effected the way the assessment for both genders. Thus, according to Jumilan (2014), soft skills can be developed by students through their involvement in co-curricular activities. Active involvement in co-curricular activities enables students to build social skills in daily life by interacting individually or collectively (Mancha & Ahmad, 2016). The interactions between students, teachers and peers act as a catalyst for the development of soft skills.

The involvement of students in co-curricular activities also provides opportunities for them to use all their existing skills and polish their talents and potential so that they develop positively for the future (Musa & Othman, 2014). It is explained by Jamaludin et al. (2009) that co-curricular activities provide students with several important skills such as (1) communication skills, (2) critical thinking and problem-solving skills, (3) teamwork skills, (4) continuous learning and information management skills, (5) entrepreneurship skills, (6) professional ethics and morals, and (7) subsequent leadership skills to form holistic human capital.

### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research method in a school in the district of Keramat, Kuala Lumpur. The participants were chosen through simple random sampling, which involved a total of 480 students in forms three, four and five (15 to 17 years old) as respondents to this study. Referring to Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, for a population of 480, a minimum number of samples would be  $n = 214$ . The instrument used has been adapted from the study of Mohamad and Salamuddin (2020) which was developed based on the seven components of *Insaniah Mesti-KIM* (must have) skills outlined by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006), namely (1) communication skills, (2) critical thinking and

problem solving skills, (3) teamwork skills, (4) continuous learning and information management skills, (5) entrepreneurship skills, (6) professional ethics and morals, and (7) leadership skills. The results of the pilot study show that all seven test constructs have a Cronbach's Alpha reliability value of 0.728 to 0.851. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents online with help from the respective classroom teachers.

Descriptive analysis and inference analysis have been used to meet each of the objectives outlined. Descriptive analysis was used to study the level of student involvement in the new norm co-curricular activities and the level of mastery of soft skills after joining the new norm co-curricular activities, which was referred based on the mean. The inferential analysis also involved a two-sample, independent t-test to study the different levels of student involvement in the new norm co-curricular activities and the different levels of mastery of soft skills after joining the new norm co-curricular activities based on gender. In addition, the Pearson Correlation test and the simple regression test were conducted in this study to discover the relationship and influence existing between the variables involved in this study.

### **Findings and Discussion**

From the initial data received ( $n=255$ ), only 97.25% (248) of the data were analyzed. 2.75% of the data (7 responses) were discarded due to extreme values. The normality test shows that data is normally distributed ( $p>.05$ ). Therefore, this study was analyzed using a parametric testing tool for data involving inferential analysis.

### **Demographical Background of Respondents**

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents involved in the study. The distribution of respondents by gender shows that the number of female students ( $n=138$ , 55.6%) is higher than that of male students ( $n=110$ , 44.4%). The distribution of respondents by form shows that form 5 students are the dominant respondents ( $n=92$ , 37.1%). In addition, there were 89 (35.9%) form 3 students, and 67 (27%) form 4 students.

Table 1

*Demographical background of respondents*

|                       | Group  | (n) | (%)  |
|-----------------------|--------|-----|------|
| <b>Gender</b>         | Male   | 110 | 44.4 |
|                       | Female | 138 | 55.6 |
| <b>Level of class</b> | Form 3 | 89  | 35.9 |
|                       | Form 4 | 67  | 27.0 |
|                       | Form 5 | 92  | 37.1 |
| <b>Total</b>          |        | 248 | 100  |

### **Level of Involvement in Co-curricular Activities**

The results from the data analysis in Table 2 show that the overall level of student involvement in the new norm co-curricular activities during the COVID-19 pandemic was at a medium level ( $m=2.84 \pm .86$ ). Furthermore, the results show that the level of involvement of female students ( $m=2.91 \pm .86$ ) in new norm co-curricular activities was higher than male students ( $m=2.76 \pm .86$ ). This indicates that the level of involvement in new norm co-curricular activities among students can be considered good, compared to the previous study by Adnan and Rahman (2010), which found that students' involvement in new norm co-curricular

activities was moderately high (Sidik et al., 2020) despite the COVID-19 situation, which is far from normal in terms of the operation of activities for students physically in school.

The results of this study may be influenced by the cautiousness of parents and students with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation caused some parents not to allow their children to participate in co-curricular activities at school. They felt safe if their children returned directly home after the school session was over. According to Mohamed et al (2020) it is undeniable that everyone was in a state of panic at the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Co-curricular activities, which normally run through physical interactions, shifted to new norm co-curricular activities following the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education. This has affected the pattern of implementing the existing co-curricular activities, which then had an impact on the level of students' participation (Zakari & Muhamad, 2021).

Table 2

*Level of Involvement in AKNB*

|                  | Level of Involvement in AKNB |                 |                 |
|------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                  | Male                         | Female          | Total           |
| Min              | 2.76 $\pm$ .86               | 2.91 $\pm$ .86  | 2.84 $\pm$ .86  |
| Interpretation n | Moderate<br>110              | Moderate<br>138 | Moderate<br>248 |

**Level of Mastery of Soft Skills after Involvement in New Norm Co-curricular Activities**

Table 3 shows that the level of mastery of soft skills of female students ( $m=3.76\pm.38$ ) is higher than that of male students ( $m=3.70\pm.45$ ). However, the overall level of mastery of soft skills among students after joining the new norm co-curricular activities was at a moderately high level ( $m=3.74\pm.41$ ). The results of this study are in line with the results of several previous studies (Sidik et al., 2020). According to Hassan and Safar (2010), mastery of soft skills is influenced by the factor of students' involvement in co-curricular activities. Those factors that contribute to the mastery of soft skills among students in schools include (1) teaching and learning in the classroom, (2) social activities in schools, and (3) student activities (Irwan et al., 2020).

Table 3

*Level of mastery of soft skills after involvement in new norm co-curricular activities*

|                  | Level of mastery of soft skills after involvement in AKNB |                        |                        |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|                  | Male                                                      | Female                 | Total                  |
| Min              | 3.70 $\pm$ .45                                            | 3.76 $\pm$ .38         | 3.74 $\pm$ .41         |
| Interpretation n | Moderately high<br>110                                    | Moderately high<br>138 | Moderately high<br>248 |

**Differences in the Level of Involvement in New Norm Co-curricular Activities based on Gender**

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference in the level of involvement in new norm co-curricular activities among students based on gender.

Based on the results in Table 4, the study shows that there is no significant difference in the level of students' involvement in new norm co-curricular activities based on gender [ $t(2,246)=-1.349$ ,  $p>.05=.179$ ]. Through the results, it can be concluded that gender is not an indicator of different levels of student involvement in new norm co-curricular activities in schools. The results of this study contradict the findings of Kamal (2011), and differ from the results of Klomsten et al (2004), who found that there is a different level of student involvement in co-curricular activities based on gender. In addition, the results of this study illustrate that the new norm co-curricular activities that have been carried out in schools are applicable to and involve students of different genders. This situation is reflected by the equality of the participation from students in co-curricular activities at school.

Table 4

*T-test analysis: Differences in the level of involvement in AKNB based on gender*

| Gender | n   | Min       | df  | t      | Sig  |
|--------|-----|-----------|-----|--------|------|
| Male   | 110 | 2.76±0.86 | 246 | -1.349 | .179 |
| Female | 138 | 2.91±0.86 |     |        |      |

#### **The differences in the level of mastery in soft skills after involvement in new norm co-curricular activities based on gender**

$H_02$ : There is no significant difference in the level of mastery of soft skills after involvement in new norm co-curricular activities among students based on gender.

Based on Table 5, the results of the study show that there is no significant difference in the level of mastery of soft skills after joining the new norm co-curricular activities among students based on gender [ $t(2,246)=-1.222$ ,  $p>.05=.223$ ]. Furthermore, it can be summarised that the gender factor is not an indicator in determining different levels of mastery of soft skills. These findings are in line with the results of the previous study by Keong (2014). In addition, the results of this study show that the new norm co-curricular activities implemented in schools have succeeded in providing equal opportunities for students to develop soft skills among themselves regardless of their gender.

Table 5

*T-test analysis: Differences in the level of mastery of soft skills based on gender*

| Gender | n   | Min      | df  | t      | Sig  |
|--------|-----|----------|-----|--------|------|
| Male   | 110 | 3.70±.45 | 246 | -1.222 | .223 |
| Female | 138 | 3.76±.38 |     |        |      |

#### **Relationship between Students' Involvement in New Norm Co-Curricular Activities and Mastery of Soft Skills**

$H_03$ : There is no significant relationship between students' involvement in AKNB and their mastery of soft skills.

Based on the results in Table 6, the study shows that there is a significant relationship between the level of students' involvement in the new norm co-curricular activities and the level of their mastery of soft skills [ $r(2,248)=.299$ ,  $p<.01=.0001$ ]. There is a positively weak relationship between those two variables. These results are in line with the study of Hassan et al (2013). In addition, Musa and Othman (2014) also found that there is a relationship between participation in co-curricular activities and the level of mastery of soft skills. Previous

researchers also agree that co-curricular activities can provide opportunities for individuals to master soft skills (Mohamed, 2014).

Table 6

*Pearson's correlation: Relationship between new norm co-curricular activities and*

|                                                                                                           | n   | r    | Sig. (p) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|----------|
| Relationship between new norm co-curricular activities and level of mastery in soft skills among students | 248 | .299 | .0001    |

level of mastery in soft skills among students

### **Influence of students' involvement in new norm co-curricular activities on their level of mastery in soft skills**

H04: There is no significant influence of students' involvement in new norm co-curricular activities on their level of mastery of soft skills

Table 7 shows that there is an influence of the level of student involvement in new norm co-curricular activities on their level of mastery of soft skills [ $f(2,248)=21,630$ ,  $r=.284$ ,  $r^2=.081$ ,  $p<.05=.0001$ ]. The effect that exists is positively low ( $r^2=.081$ ). This means that the increase in the level of students' participation in new norm co-curricular activities will increase the level of mastery of students' soft skills by 8.1%.

Table 7

*Regression Analysis: Influence of students' involvement in new norm co-curricular activities on their level of mastery of soft skills*

| Model | r                 | $r^2$ | f      | Sig. (p) |
|-------|-------------------|-------|--------|----------|
| 1     | .284 <sup>a</sup> | .081  | 21.630 | .0001    |

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of new norm co-curricular activities is more challenging than the implementation of co-curricular activities before the COVID-19 pandemic. Various challenges need to be faced from the administrative level to the implementers (teachers). The main challenge is to convince parents to allow students to participate in co-curricular activities at school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study also show that the level of student involvement in new norm co-curricular activities is still low. To overcome this problem, schools must convince parents that the new norm co-curricular activities will be carried out according to strict SOPs to avoid the occurrence of a COVID-19 outbreak. In that case, parents will be more confident to allow and encourage their children to participate in co-curricular activities at school.

Another challenge faced by teachers is to ensure that new norm co-curricular activities provide students with the same enjoyment and results regardless of gender. According to Ahmad (2011), male students are more interested in being involved in physical activities compared to female students, who are very selective in choosing activities they want to participate in. Perhaps, according to Klomsten (2004), female students have lower self-esteem than male students regarding physical activity. However, this has proven that there is equality in student's involvement in new norm co-curricular activities that provide enjoyment and chances of ability for students to gain experience from co-curricular activities to foster their mastery level of soft skills.

A third challenge is to ensure that new norm co-curricular activities can have a positive impact on the development of students' soft skills. The main purpose of co-curricular activities is to provide experiences for individuals to achieve more quality of life (Adnan & Rahman, 2010). The results of this study indicate that there is only a low positive relationship between the level of student involvement in the new norm co-curricular activities and their level of mastery of soft skills. In addition, the level of students' participation in new norm co-curricular activities also has a low positive impact on the level of mastery of students' soft skills. In fact, the success obtained with strong social support factors such as (1) school administrators, (2) co-curriculum management, (3) teachers, (4) parents, and (5) the students themselves. The support from a positive social environment provides stimulation and motivation for students, and encourages them to involve themselves in new norm co-curricular activities so that they can subsequently improve their mastery of soft skills. According to Sidek et al (2018), social environment support has a significant relationship with students' mastery of soft skills. Furthermore, the social support factor is considered as a significant element in achieving this objective. A positive school environment can be a contributing factor to students' participation in co-curricular activities (Hassan et al., 2013). Through co-curricular activities, students can enhance their talents and potential, especially in soft skills (Mohamed, 2014). Therefore, new norm co-curricular activities need to be structured and implemented effectively because the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to shift toward an endemic phase (Abdullah & Ismail, 2021).

The implications of this study indicate that co-curricular activities need to be carried out in schools even with the new norm to ensure students do not miss out on equipping themselves with soft skills. In addition, good curriculum management at the school level plays a major role in ensuring students' involvement in new norm co-curricular activities. Quality planning and implementation of co-curriculum management attracts students' involvement (Michael & Ambotang, 2019). Therefore, all stakeholders need to work together to initiate ideas to create more co-curricular activities that are meaningful for students. Further studies may be carried out with the purpose of improving the new norm co-curricular activities that have been implemented, and to learn about detailed issues or problems related to this particular matter.

### **Acknowledgement**

This study is conducted under FRGS/1/2017/SSI09/UKM/02/3 grant.

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