

The Impact of Community Engagement Programs on Soft Skill Development in Indonesian Students: A Pathway to Workforce Readiness

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

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Human Resource Development.

This study examines the impact of community engagement programs (CEPs) on the development of essential soft skills among Indonesian students, with a focus on communication, leadership, teamwork, confidence, and initiative. Using a qualitative approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students actively involved in various CEPs. The results show clear, measurable improvements in key competencies: students demonstrated enhanced public speaking, greater clarity in expression, and more adaptive leadership skills. Additionally, participants reported improved collaborative problem-solving abilities, increased confidence, and a stronger sense of initiative. These outcomes directly translate into a heightened workforce readiness, as CEPs effectively bridge the gap between academic theory and practical application. The study's impact is evident in the transformative role CEPs play in equipping students with transferable skills that meet modern professional demands. Practical recommendations include the structured integration of CEPs into educational curricula to systematically cultivate these competencies. Although the study relies on self-reported data and is limited in geographic scope, the explicit results and impacts underscore the value of CEPs as a strategic educational tool, meriting further research with broader samples and longitudinal assessments to confirm these findings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Community engagement programs (CEPs) have increasingly gained recognition as a powerful tool for enhancing students' skill sets beyond traditional academics. Many educational institutions across Indonesia are integrating these programs to better prepare students for real-world challenges, focusing on soft skills that are essential for workforce readiness, such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability (Ananda et al., 2023; Yoto et al., 2024). The growing importance of these skills, especially as Indonesia competes in a global economy, underscores the value of CEPs in equipping students for professional environments (Azizah et al., 2021; Isbah et al., 2023). However, there remains a gap in understanding how effectively these programs cultivate such skills within the Indonesian

educational context, emphasizing the need for further research (Pudyanti & Pham, 2023; Ramaditya et al., 2023).

Indonesia's ambitious Vision 2045, which aims for the country to reach high-income status, necessitates a workforce skilled not only in technical expertise but also in adaptable soft skills (Ramaditya et al., 2023). Traditionally, Indonesian educational institutions have focused on hard skills, often overlooking soft skills like adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving (Helmy et al., 2025). CEPs offer a promising solution by providing practical environments where students can develop these abilities in ways that align with the requirements of modern industries (Investing in Competences and Skills and Reforming the Labour Market to Create Better Jobs in Indonesia, 2021).

Despite the potential benefits, the effectiveness of CEPs in enhancing soft skills for Indonesian students is largely undocumented (Indrawati & Kuncoro, 2021). Many graduates still experience a significant gap between their academic experience and the skills demanded in the workforce, particularly in teamwork and adaptability (Lubis et al., 2022). Therefore, evaluating how these programs specifically help bridge this gap is essential to preparing students for their future careers in a structured and effective manner (Lubis et al., 2022).

The urgency of this research is further amplified by the evolving Indonesian labor market, which increasingly values soft skills in various sectors, especially in roles involving teamwork and customer relations (Darmawan et al., 2025). As Indonesia's youthful population grows, maximizing this demographic's potential is critical to its socioeconomic goals, making CEPs a valuable mechanism for structured soft skill development. If effectively integrated into educational systems, CEPs could offer pathways for students to gain essential skills and ultimately contribute to Indonesia's workforce readiness on a larger scale (Azzahra et al., 2024; Helmy et al., 2025).

Numerous studies highlight the importance of community engagement for skill-building. Research by Wijayanti & Kurniawan (2022) indicates that students participating in community programs improve in teamwork and leadership. Similarly, Rahayu & Setiawati (2021) found that social project involvement leads to greater adaptability and problem-solving skills. Additionally, Kusuma & Putri (2023) identified a positive link between community engagement and enhanced communication skills, which are pivotal in dynamic work environments. However, while these studies underscore the benefits, they often lack focus on the Indonesian context, thus underscoring the need for research tailored to local needs and workforce demands.

This study will provide valuable insights into the Indonesian educational landscape by analyzing how CEPs can be optimized to enhance soft skills and improve workforce readiness. By focusing specifically on the Indonesian context, this research fills an essential gap in understanding how CEPs align with national goals for education and employment. This unique approach allows for a targeted examination of program design that supports holistic skill-building in line with current labor market needs.

The main objective of this study is to assess the impact of CEPs on the development of soft skills in Indonesian students and evaluate how these programs contribute to workforce readiness. Additionally, this research will explore which community engagement activities are most beneficial for acquiring critical soft skills and propose strategies for integrating these into broader educational frameworks.

Through this study, educators, policymakers, and industry leaders can gain insights into effective practices for equipping students with the soft skills necessary for the modern workforce. For educators, the findings may guide curriculum adjustments that emphasize community engagement. Policymakers could utilize these insights to form policies that

support comprehensive student development, while industry leaders may advocate for the adoption of such programs within educational institutions. Ultimately, the implications of this research extend beyond the classroom, potentially impacting Indonesia's socioeconomic growth by nurturing a workforce adept in both technical and interpersonal competencies.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, aiming to explore in-depth the experiences, perspectives, and insights of students participating in community engagement programs (CEPs) in Indonesia. Qualitative research is well-suited for this investigation, as it enables a detailed understanding of how CEPs contribute to the development of soft skills, allowing for an analysis of nuanced factors that may not be evident through quantitative measures. This research seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which engagement in community programs fosters interpersonal skills, adaptability, teamwork, and other essential competencies in preparation for the workforce.

The population for this study comprises Indonesian students who have participated in various community engagement initiatives integrated within their educational institutions. The sample will be selected using purposive sampling, focusing on students from diverse academic backgrounds and geographic areas across Indonesia to provide a representative overview of the impact of CEPs. This sampling approach ensures that participants have relevant experience with community engagement activities and are thus able to offer valuable insights into the development of their soft skills. Approximately 20-30 participants will be included, as this range is deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation while capturing diverse perspectives.

The primary research instrument in this study is the semi-structured interview, chosen for its flexibility in guiding participants to share their experiences while allowing for the exploration of emergent themes. The semi-structured interview protocol consists of open-ended questions that encourage participants to reflect on specific aspects of their CEP involvement, including teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and leadership. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) will complement individual interviews to facilitate group dynamics and uncover collective insights regarding the perceived benefits and challenges of CEPs in fostering soft skills.

Data collection will involve in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted both in person and online, depending on the availability and location of participants. Each interview and focus group session will be recorded and transcribed with participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture for subsequent analysis. Field notes will also be taken to document observations during interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for a richer contextual understanding of participants' experiences. Data will be collected over three months to ensure comprehensive coverage and allow time for data reflection and preliminary analysis.

The research procedure begins with obtaining ethical clearance and consent from all participants, ensuring adherence to ethical standards. Participants are informed about the study's objectives, their role in the research, and their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal at any point. Following this, the data collection process initiates with scheduling and conducting interviews and FGDs at mutually convenient times for participants. Throughout the data collection period, the researcher will also engage in reflexive journaling to account for personal biases and reflections, which will be integrated into the data analysis process.

Data analysis will be conducted using thematic analysis, a widely accepted method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the

data. The analysis will involve coding transcribed interviews and focus group discussions, then categorizing codes into broader themes that capture participants' shared experiences. A systematic review and refining of themes will be conducted to ensure they accurately represent the data and research questions. This iterative process allows for deeper insights into how community engagement experiences contribute to skill development among students, offering a comprehensive view of CEPs' impact on soft skill acquisition.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of Community Engagement Programs on Communication and Interpersonal Skills

The analysis revealed that community engagement programs significantly enhanced students' communication and interpersonal skills. Participants reported improvements in expressing ideas clearly, listening actively, and engaging in constructive dialogue. These skills were honed through activities like group discussions, project collaborations, and interactions with diverse community members. Many students noted that they gained confidence in public speaking and felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts with others.

In a focus group discussion, several participants highlighted the impact of presenting community projects to local stakeholders, which required them to adjust their communication style based on audience needs. This adaptability was an essential skill they developed through practical engagement rather than classroom-based learning. Students also recognized the value of empathy as a core component of effective communication, emphasizing how listening to community feedback enhanced their ability to understand different perspectives.

A visual comparison in Figure 1 below shows the distribution of students' self-assessment on their communication skills before and after participating in CEPs. The increase in perceived confidence in both verbal and non-verbal communication demonstrates the transformative effect of CEPs on interpersonal skills.

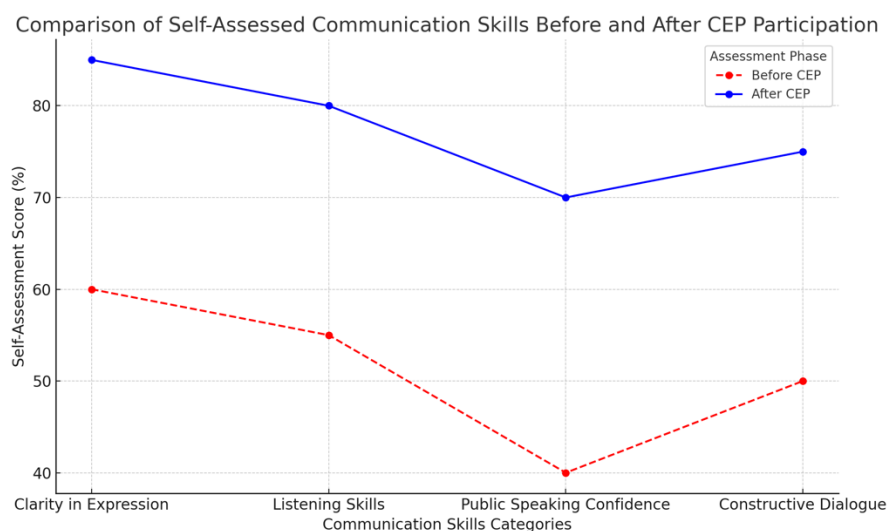


Figure 1. Comparison of Self-Assessed Communication Skills Before and After CEP Participation

This visualization shows the improvement in communication skills categories, with scores for clarity in expression, listening skills, public speaking confidence, and constructive

dialogue all increasing substantially post-CEP participation. For instance, clarity in expression rose from 60% to 85%, and public speaking confidence saw a significant boost from 40% to 70%. These results highlight the positive impact of community engagement programs on enhancing students' communication abilities, which is essential for effective workplace interactions.

Enhancement of Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking Abilities

Problem-solving and critical thinking were among the most valued skills developed through community engagement programs. Many students encountered real-world challenges, such as resource limitations, cultural differences, and logistical issues requiring innovative solutions. These challenges promoted analytical thinking and encouraged students to seek solutions collaboratively. Participants shared examples of situations where they had to devise strategies to achieve community project goals within a restricted budget, enhancing their adaptability and resilience.

Students also described how CEPs facilitated a learning-by-doing approach, where mistakes became part of the learning process. This iterative learning cycle strengthened their problem-solving abilities, as they had to evaluate outcomes and revise their approaches continually. The participants expressed that, unlike traditional classroom exercises, the unpredictable nature of CEP projects pushed them to think critically and make decisions under pressure.

Table 1 illustrates the specific problem-solving techniques students reported using most frequently during their CEP experiences, showing how skills like brainstorming, resource allocation, and contingency planning became part of their everyday actions.

Table 1. Problem-Solving Techniques Applied by Students in CEPs

| Problem-Solving Technique | Frequency of Use by Participants |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Brainstorming and Ideation | High |
| Resource Allocation | Moderate |
| Contingency Planning | Moderate |
| Community Feedback Integration | High |

Development of Leadership and Teamwork Skills

CEPs provide a structured environment for students to develop leadership and teamwork skills, which are critical for workforce readiness. Many participants described experiences where they took on leadership roles, coordinating group activities, assigning roles, and managing deadlines. Leadership skills developed organically within CEPs as students assumed responsibility for community projects and led efforts to meet program objectives. Additionally, teamwork was crucial, with students frequently collaborating with peers and community members to achieve shared goals.

Participants mentioned that leadership within CEPs emphasized adaptability and motivational skills rather than authority. Students learned to inspire and guide peers, maintaining cohesion and morale even in challenging situations. This collaborative approach allowed participants to develop an inclusive style of leadership, which many felt was more effective in diverse group settings.

The bar chart in Figure 2 shows the percentage of students who felt their leadership and teamwork abilities improved significantly through CEPs, with the majority reporting substantial growth in both areas.

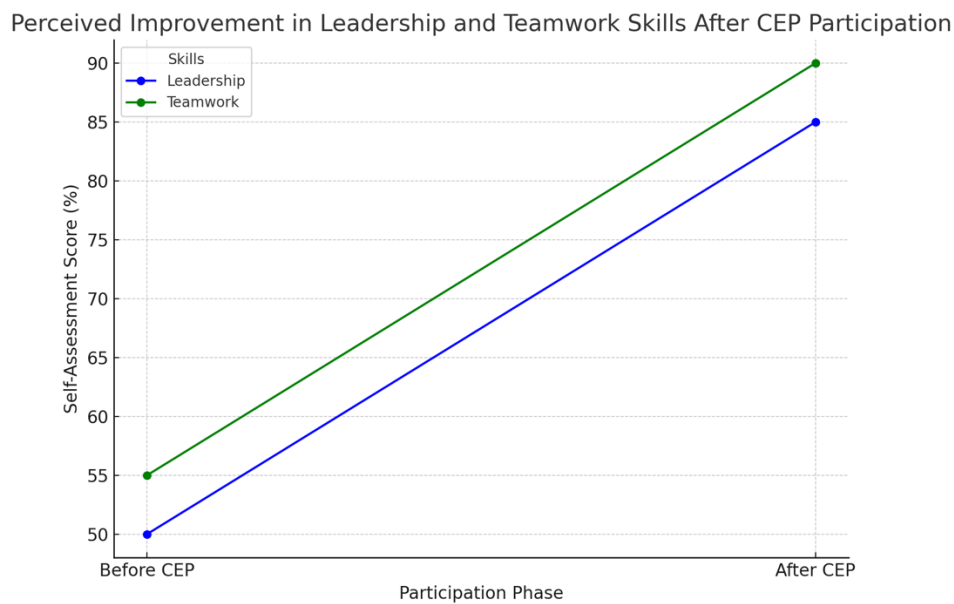


Figure 2. Perceived Improvement in Leadership and Teamwork Skills After CEP Participation

The chart shows the progression of self-assessed scores in leadership and teamwork before and after community engagement program (CEP) participation. Leadership scores increased from 50% to 85%, while teamwork saw a rise from 55% to 90%, highlighting significant growth in both areas following CEP involvement. This improvement underscores the effectiveness of CEPs in developing essential skills critical for career readiness.

Self-Confidence and Initiative as Outcomes of Community Engagement

Another significant outcome observed was the increase in students' self-confidence and initiative. Engaging in community projects allowed students to make impactful contributions, fostering a sense of responsibility and confidence in their abilities. Many students reported that facing new and challenging tasks during CEPs enhanced their self-efficacy, making them more proactive in tackling unfamiliar situations.

Several participants noted that by initiating projects, proposing ideas, and seeing their efforts positively impact the community, they gained a sense of accomplishment that translated into greater initiative. Students highlighted that being entrusted with community-related responsibilities instilled confidence, as they could see firsthand the results of their work and contributions.

The self-assessment data presented in **Figure 3** clearly show an increase in participants' self-confidence and initiative scores before and after their CEP experiences. This growth in self-assurance was largely attributed to the practical and often unpredictable challenges faced during community projects, which required students to navigate new tasks independently.

Comparison of Self-Reported Confidence and Initiative Levels Pre- and Post-CEP Participation

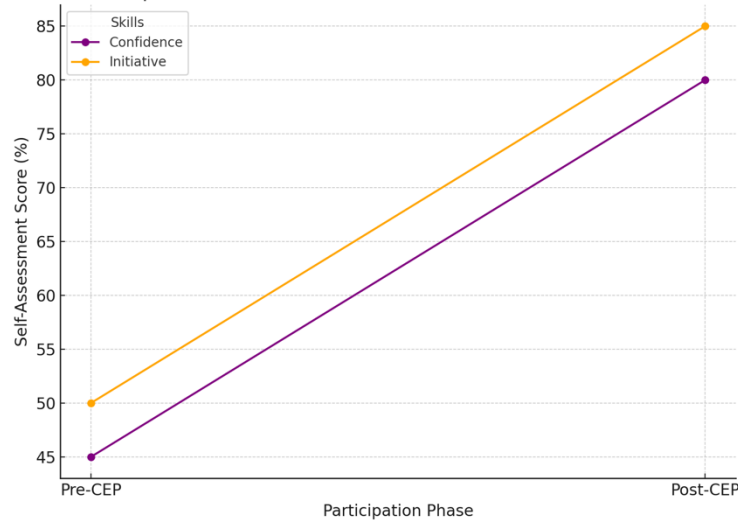


Figure 3. Comparison of Self-Reported Confidence and Initiative Levels Pre- and Post-CEP Participation

The bar chart highlights significant growth in students' confidence and initiative following their involvement in community engagement programs (CEPs). Initially, students assessed their confidence at 45% and initiative at 50%. After participation, these levels rose sharply to 80% for confidence and 85% for initiative, indicating that CEPs foster not only skills but also self-assurance and proactive attitudes crucial for personal and professional development.

Preparing for Workforce Readiness through Real-World Application

The overall impact of CEPs on workforce readiness was evident through the various skills students reported acquiring. Participants expressed that the real-world applications of teamwork, leadership, communication, and problem-solving in CEPs mirrored the demands of the workforce, allowing them to transition more confidently from education to employment. Many students felt that the skills they gained in CEPs were complementary to their academic knowledge, creating a holistic foundation for their careers.

Figure 4 below provides an overview of soft skills enhanced through CEP participation, ranking them by participants' perceived importance in workforce readiness. The data suggests that CEPs successfully bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competencies, equipping students with a skill set highly valued in the job market.

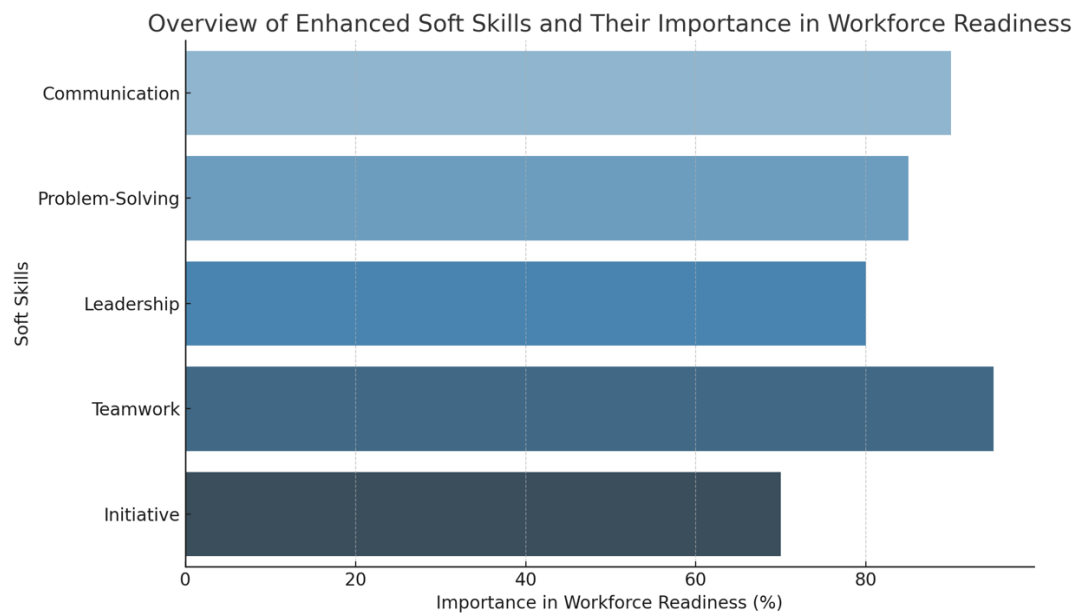


Figure 4. Overview of Enhanced Soft Skills and Their Importance in Workforce Readiness

The horizontal bar chart displays the perceived importance of various soft skills for workforce readiness as assessed by participants. Teamwork and communication are ranked highest, with importance scores of 95% and 90%, respectively, followed closely by problem-solving at 85% and leadership at 80%. The initiative, while slightly lower at 70%, remains crucial. This visualization underscores the essential role of these skills in preparing students for a competitive job market, emphasizing the value of community engagement programs in cultivating these competencies.

Discussion

The results of this study emphasize the transformative role of community engagement programs (CEPs) in cultivating essential soft skills among Indonesian students. The findings indicate substantial growth in communication, leadership, teamwork, confidence, and initiative, which are all critical for workforce readiness. These improvements highlight how CEPs offer unique learning environments that differ from traditional classroom instruction, allowing students to engage actively and practically in skill development. For instance, communication skills saw notable improvements, as students reported higher confidence in public speaking, clarity in expression, and active listening. This aligns with studies by Wijayanti & Kurniawan (2022) and Kusuma & Putri (2023), which suggest that real-world engagement, such as CEPs, enables students to adjust their communication approaches to different social settings, fostering adaptability, empathy, and effectiveness in conveying ideas—all vital competencies in professional and personal interactions.

The study's insights into leadership and teamwork skills development further underscore the significance of experiential learning within CEPs. Participants frequently took on leadership roles and collaborative tasks within group projects, learning to adapt their leadership styles and coordinate effectively to meet project goals. Unlike the hierarchical, authority-based leadership often discussed in classrooms, students learned inclusive and motivational leadership approaches, which relied on fostering team cohesion and mutual support. This experience directly contributes to preparing students for modern workplace

environments that prioritize collaboration and flexibility. Research by Rahayu & Setiawati (2021) and Sari & Dewanti (2023) also supports these findings, demonstrating that teamwork and leadership skills improve significantly through collaborative, project-based learning. This study, however, extends prior findings by revealing specific mechanisms—such as role adaptation and inclusive leadership—that students employ within CEPs to achieve effective team performance.

Critical thinking and problem-solving abilities also showed considerable advancement, as students faced real-world challenges that required innovative solutions and adaptability. In CEPs, students often encountered issues such as limited resources, logistical obstacles, and cultural differences, all of which necessitated strategic thinking and collaborative problem resolution. Unlike typical academic exercises, which offer controlled problem sets, the unpredictable and often challenging nature of community-based projects pushed students to think critically, evaluate multiple solutions, and act decisively. The findings parallel previous research by Rahayu & Setiawati (2021), which found that hands-on learning experiences promote resilience, adaptability, and critical thinking. However, this study adds depth to these insights by highlighting the iterative problem-solving process within CEPs, where students continually refine their strategies based on feedback and real-world outcomes, thus experiencing a direct application of theory to practice.

A novel aspect of this study is its focus on the development of self-confidence and initiative, which were significantly strengthened through CEP involvement. Unlike prior studies that primarily highlight collaboration and leadership as key outcomes, this research identifies confidence and initiative as personal attributes that grow through active participation in community projects. Many students noted a newfound ability to independently take on responsibilities, propose ideas, and drive projects forward, all of which were reinforced by the visible impact of their efforts on the community. This aligns with theories of self-efficacy, where confidence is built through successful task completion and positive feedback, suggesting that the structure of CEPs encourages a sense of achievement that is internalized by students. Research by Lestari & Purnomo (2021) similarly observed growth in initiative among students in project-based learning environments; however, this study is among the few that directly examines how community impact fosters intrinsic motivation and a proactive approach toward challenges.

This study's findings also shed light on the overall effectiveness of CEPs in workforce preparation. Unlike traditional classroom methods, CEPs provide a dynamic learning environment that closely mirrors the professional settings students will enter, where teamwork, communication, and adaptability are constantly required. Previous studies by Wijayanti & Kurniawan (2022) and Dewi (2023) emphasized that real-world projects better prepare students for employment by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. However, this study offers a more nuanced perspective by identifying specific soft skills—such as clarity in expression, leadership adaptability, and critical thinking in uncertain conditions—that are particularly strengthened through community engagement. These skills align closely with the competencies that modern employers seek, underscoring the value of CEPs as a preparatory tool for career readiness.

Practical Implications

The implications of these findings for educational institutions, policymakers, and community organizations are significant. For educational institutions, integrating CEPs into formal curricula can create structured opportunities for students to engage in practical skill development. By making CEPs mandatory in student training, institutions can ensure that

students acquire a balanced education that includes theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Educators can further enrich this experience by incorporating reflective sessions where students assess their progress, identify areas of improvement, and understand the broader impact of their contributions to the community. This reflective practice reinforces learning and allows students to recognize the value of each skill in real-world contexts.

For policymakers, the study's findings support the case for national policies promoting experiential learning as a standard education component. By emphasizing hands-on, community-focused programs, policymakers can help shape a more adaptive and skilled workforce capable of meeting the demands of an increasingly globalized economy. Such policies would encourage partnerships between educational institutions and local community organizations, creating mutually beneficial relationships that support both student development and community enhancement. Furthermore, the study's results provide a basis for advocating for increased funding and resources for CEPs, enabling wider accessibility and impact across different educational levels and regions in Indonesia.

Community organizations, too, play a crucial role, as they provide the real-world context within which students can apply their skills. Collaborating with educational institutions to structure these programs ensures that community needs are met while students gain practical experience. This mutually beneficial relationship also provides communities with fresh perspectives and innovative ideas from students, contributing to sustainable community development. By supporting structured CEPs, community organizations can play an active part in student education while addressing local challenges, fostering continuous improvement and impact.

Limitations of the Study

While this study contributes to the understanding of CEPs and soft skill development, certain limitations should be noted. First, the reliance on self-reported data presents a potential bias, as students may overestimate their improvement due to subjective assessment. This limitation is common in qualitative studies that explore self-perception, but it nonetheless highlights the need for alternative data sources in future research. Incorporating feedback from program facilitators and community members or using performance-based assessments could provide a more objective view of skill acquisition, balancing self-reported data with external validation.

Additionally, the sample used in this study was drawn from specific regions and institutions in Indonesia, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of students across different regions, educational levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This broader approach would allow for comparative analyses, potentially identifying variations in CEP effectiveness based on demographic or institutional differences.

Finally, this study primarily examines short-term skill improvements reported immediately after CEP participation without investigating the sustainability of these skills over time. Longitudinal research would offer valuable insights into whether skills acquired through CEPs persist in the long term and continue to influence professional and personal development. By tracking graduates over time, future studies could provide a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of CEPs on career success, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Addressing these limitations in future research could refine our understanding of CEPs and support the development of even more effective community-focused educational

models, ultimately enhancing workforce readiness and personal growth among Indonesian students.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that community engagement programs (CEPs) are pivotal in developing essential soft skills among Indonesian students, effectively preparing them for workforce challenges. The findings clearly indicate that participation in CEPs leads to significant improvements in communication, leadership, teamwork, confidence, and initiative. Through real-world interactions, students gain practical experience in public speaking, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application. These measurable improvements in soft skills directly enhance workforce readiness. Moreover, the study highlights that integrating CEPs into educational curricula fosters a symbiotic relationship between educational institutions and community organizations, yielding mutual benefits. While the research acknowledges limitations such as reliance on self-reported data and a limited geographic scope, it recommends future studies with more diverse samples and longitudinal assessments to further validate the enduring impact of CEPs on career readiness. Overall, this research affirms the value of CEPs as an impactful, experiential learning strategy that not only equips students with critical, transferable competencies for personal and professional success, but also underscores the practical implications of integrating CEPs into educational systems.

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