

Enhancing Elderly Well-being through Participatory Community Service: A Cross-Border Program in Malaysia

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Article History:

Received : 15 Juni 2026

Review : 18 Juni 2026

Revised : 20 Juli 2026

Accepted : 29 Juli 2026

Keywords: Community service, elderly, well-being, care center, spirituality.

Abstract: This community service activity was carried out by a team from Muhammadiyah University of Riau at the Al-Ikhlas Elderly Care and Nursing Center in Selangor, Malaysia, with the aim of improving the well-being of the elderly through social, spiritual, and educational approaches. The activities were conducted in a participatory manner through senior exercise classes, art therapy, basic financial management education, and spiritual guidance. Of the 44 elderly individuals targeted by the program, 30 (68.18%) actively participated in the activities, while the remaining 14 were unable to participate due to health conditions. Results from observations and informal interviews indicated that the activities had a positive impact on the elderly, as evidenced by increased enthusiasm, social interaction, and participant engagement throughout the program. In addition to benefiting the elderly, these activities also fostered empathy, social awareness, and learning experiences among students as they interacted with a vulnerable group. It is hoped that this program will serve as a model for sustainable, cross-border community service rooted in humanitarian values.

A. Introduction

The growing number of older adults has become one of the social challenges faced by various countries, including Malaysia. Older adults living in nursing homes not only face physical health issues but are also vulnerable to loneliness, a decline in social interaction, a reduction in meaningful activities, and various psychological stresses that can affect their quality of life (Mansor et al., 2022). These conditions indicate that efforts to improve the well-being of the elderly require an approach that not only focuses on health aspects but also addresses social, emotional, and spiritual needs.

One of the institutions playing a role in providing services to the elderly in Malaysia is the Al-Ikhlas Elderly Care and Treatment Center, located in Selangor. This facility houses elderly residents from various social backgrounds and with diverse health conditions. Based on initial observations and discussions with the facility's management, some residents face limitations in participating in regular social activities due to their health conditions and advanced age. In addition, the available activities are still dominated by daily routines, so additional programs are needed to increase social engagement, provide emotional support, and strengthen the spiritual well-being of the elderly residents. Of the 44 residents, only about 30 are physically able to actively participate in activities, while the rest are receiving care due to specific health conditions.

Various studies show that social, spiritual, and art therapy interventions can have a positive impact on the well-being of older adults. Art therapy is known to enhance self-expression, social interaction, and emotional well-being among older adults (Belzil et al., 2020;

Khairunisa, et al., 2025). On the other hand, spiritual approaches play a crucial role in enhancing inner peace, a sense of purpose, and psychological well-being among older adults (Haruns et al., 2024). Participatory approaches that actively involve older adults have also been shown to improve their social engagement and quality of life (Sulaiman & Hassan, 2022).

Nevertheless, most of the programs that have been reported are still implemented separately and focus on a single specific aspect of intervention, such as health, art therapy, or spirituality. Community service programs that integrate art therapy, basic financial education, social activities, and spiritual guidance into a single integrated activity remain relatively limited, particularly in the context of cross-border community service. In fact, older adults require a holistic approach to address their social, emotional, spiritual, and educational needs simultaneously. These limitations highlight the need for a more comprehensive community service model to support the well-being of older adults.

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B. Method Of Implementation Of Community Service

This community service initiative employs a participatory and humanistic approach using community-based service learning methods, which directly involve faculty and students from Muhammadiyah University of Riau in the planning and implementation of activities at the Al-Ikhlâs Elderly Care and Nursing Center in Selangor, Malaysia. The program was designed to address the psychosocial, social, and spiritual needs of the elderly through senior exercise classes, art therapy, basic financial education, and spiritual guidance. The target participants were all 44 residents of the center, ranging in age from 60 to 85 years. However, only 30 seniors were able to actively participate in the activities, as the health conditions of the other 14 did not allow them to take part in the full series of activities. The activities were held over the course of one day, on July 6, 2025, on the care center grounds, utilizing the auditorium and open spaces as activity venues.

Data collection was conducted through direct observation, documentation of activities, and informal interviews with participating older adults and nursing home administrators. The data obtained were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach to describe the participants' level of engagement and the impact of the activities on the social and emotional well-being of older adults. Indicators of the activities' success were established based on three main aspects. First, the level of elderly participation, measured by the percentage of active participants relative to the total number of nursing home residents. Second, changes in social behavior, observed through increased interaction among the elderly, engagement in discussions and group activities, and a willingness to communicate with participants and facilitators during the activities. Third, the level of happiness among the elderly, identified descriptively through positive expressions, enthusiasm for participating in the activities, active engagement in each session, and feedback provided by participants during informal interviews after the activities. Data analysis was conducted by grouping the results of observations and interviews into themes related to participation, social interaction, and participants' emotional responses. Subsequently,

the data were interpreted to describe the program's contribution to improving the well-being of the elderly during the implementation of the community service program (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

C. Results And Discussion

The community service activity carried out by a team of students and lecturers from the University of Muhammadiyah Riau at the Al-Ikhlas Elderly Care and Treatment Center in Selangor, Malaysia, took place on July 6, 2025. This activity is part of an international program themed "Accounting for Humanity: Financial Awareness for the Golden Age," which combines educational, social, and spiritual approaches to enhance the well-being of the elderly. All activities were conducted directly using interactive methods designed to actively and emotionally engage the elderly residents.



Figure 1. International Community Service Team

Based on direct observation and documentation of the activities, there was high enthusiasm among the elderly participants toward the event. The first image shows the initial interaction between students from the University of Muhammadiyah Riau and the care home residents, where they jointly held the event banner as a symbolic gesture of involvement and openness. A warm and friendly atmosphere was immediately established from the start of the activity, particularly because the approach emphasized equality and respect for the elderly as valuable individuals. According to Yusof (2021), the elderly are more likely to respond positively to activities if the approach is empathetic and participatory, rather than top-down.

Figure 2

Figure 3. *Participants from the University of Muhammadiyah Riau team*

In the second image, participants from the University of Muhammadiyah Riau team are seen alongside the home's management and a local community leader. This image reflects the cross-institutional collaboration that is the core strength of this activity. A collaborative approach has proven to have a broader impact by combining academic values, local spirituality, and existing social service practices in the area (Sulaiman & Hassan, 2022).

In the implementation of the activities, there were several main sessions designed to target the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions of the elderly. The first session was light exercise for the elderly, which aimed to help maintain body flexibility and increase happiness hormones (endorphins) that are important for the mental health of the elderly (World Health Organization, 2022). Participants' responses were very positive, evident from their cheerful expressions and nearly full participation.

The second session is art therapy and expression, which aims to provide a space for emotional expression and evoke positive memories of the past through visual symbols. Art therapy has been proven to be an effective intervention for reducing psychological stress and boosting self-confidence in the elderly (Fatimah, 2024). Many participants were engrossed in their own creations, and some even shared personal stories expressed through their drawings.

The third session was a spiritual guidance and simple financial discussion, in line with the theme of the activity, "Financial Awareness for the Golden Age." In this session, students provided a basic understanding of how to manage retirement funds, the importance of recording expenses, and how to wisely address financial needs in old age. The material was presented in a very simple manner, using illustrations and dialogues to make it easy for participants to understand. Additionally, the session included group prayers, recitation of the Quran, and reflections on life emphasizing the importance of gratitude and inner peace. The activity received a warm reception, as many participants felt that the spiritual aspect was the primary strength they possessed in facing old age.

Observations showed that the activity had a direct impact in the form of increased enthusiasm, happiness, and social interaction among the residents. Some elderly individuals

who were initially passive began to actively participate in conversations and smile during the activity. This effect aligns with the findings of (Mansor et al., 2022), who confirmed that elderly participation in social activities can slow cognitive decline and maintain emotional balance. Additionally, the nursing home management stated that the presence of international students brought a refreshing new atmosphere for the residents and is hoped to serve as a model for sustainable programs.

From the students' perspective, this activity provided a profound transformative experience. Direct interaction with the elderly offered new insights into the meaning of service, empathy, and human values. The students learned that accounting knowledge is not limited to numbers and financial reports but can also serve as a tool for social transformation that brings tangible benefits to vulnerable communities. These values are emphasized in the service learning approach, which integrates service, learning, and reflection as a method of academic character development (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Overall, this service activity provides dual benefits, both to the elderly as beneficiaries and to the students and faculty as activity implementers. In addition to serving as a concrete model of cross-border collaboration between Indonesia and Malaysia, this activity also demonstrates how a human-centered approach can address social challenges within the ASEAN regional context. This aligns with the spirit of internationalizing community service emphasized by the Indonesian Ministry of Higher Education in the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka roadmap (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

D. Conclusion

The community service activities carried out by the University of Muhammadiyah Riau at the Al-Ikhlâs Elderly Care and Treatment Center in Selangor, Malaysia, demonstrate that a social, educational, and spiritual approach can have a positive impact on the well-being of the elderly. Through simple interventions such as elderly exercises, art therapy, basic financial counseling, and spiritual guidance, the elderly participants demonstrated increased enthusiasm, more active social interaction, and a more stable and happy emotional state. The participatory approach used positions the elderly as active participants rather than mere beneficiaries, thereby creating a more inclusive and meaningful environment. Additionally, this activity provides a transformative experience for students, who learn firsthand the values of empathy, humanity, and cross-cultural social responsibility. This activity also demonstrates the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and cross-national social organizations as a form of tangible humanitarian diplomacy. Therefore, such service activities should be continuously developed with the support of the Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka curriculum, so that students are not only academically excellent but also sensitive to the real global social challenges within society.

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