Exploring the University Social Responsibility Initiatives and Sustainable Development in Malaysia: A Carroll Model Approach

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Abstract

Universities, as catalysts for social change, have significant influence over the societal, cultural, economic, and intellectual domains. They play a vital role in shaping the future and fostering beneficial social transformation. Aiming to explore the implementation and role of University Social Responsibility (USR) initiatives in achieving sustainable development in Malaysia, this research adopted Carroll's Model as a framework. A qualitative content analysis through a directed approach was performed on the official website of the Top 15 Malaysian Universities in Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking 2023. THE Impact Ranking 2023 is a worldwide ranking that evaluates universities' commitment to sustainability in four key areas: research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. The research revealed the upsurge in USR initiatives in Malaysia by public and private universities within the framework of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Equally important, the research discovered that Malaysian universities demonstrate high institutional and policy support to attain sustainable development in Malaysia. Most of the USR programs led by public and private universities are aligned with addressing specific global challenges outlined in the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals. As a theoretical contribution, the research adds to the literature on the Carroll Model Approach in the context of Malaysian universities. As a practical contribution, the research guides universities, policymakers, and stakeholders on the strategies that foster sustainability practices through USR initiatives.

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1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are increasingly regarded as playing a broader role than fulfilling the responsibility of educating youth and developing knowledge (Martí-Noguera et al., 2017). The rise of knowledge, globalisation, and the simultaneous financial and environmental crises, are unprecedented challenges that have collectively driven universities to re-evaluate and expand their missions (Rahman et. al., 2019; Rubens et. al, 2017). In response to these unprecedented challenges, universities have had to adapt and extend their roles to meet the evolving needs of society. As established by Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020), apart from the universities' core functions of providing education and conducting research, a "third mission" is added, labelled "a contribution to society". Today, social responsibility is considered a fundamental mission for universities, on par with teaching and research (Shek et al., 2017).

The concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) was coined in 2009 as an extension of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to characterise the incorporation of social responsibility principles and practices into the operations and activities of universities (Kouatli, 2019). As cited in Ahmad (2012), CSR, which primarily centred on organisations' charitable contributions to society, has evolved to encompass a more comprehensive approach. Modern CSR includes responsible business practices that go beyond financial contributions and consider the social, ethical, and environmental impact of a company's operations. However, CSR has, for the most part, remained voluntary, relying on self-regulation through codes of conduct and the discretion of corporations (Tamvada, 2020; Meseguer-Sánchez et al., 2020). Today, CSR initiatives and efforts extend their influence to include institutions of higher education, not limited to corporations alone. The prevalence and integration of CSR in universities demonstrate the expansion of CSR principles into the academic realm, emphasizing the significant role of universities as active agents of social change.

Gomez-Vasquez et al. (2014) define USR as the integration of ethical and sustainable practices into every aspect of university administration including campus operations, lectures, research, environmental impacts, and community engagement. Similarly, Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña (2017), clarify USR as the university's voluntary commitment to incorporate community, labour, ethical, and environmental issues into its various main functions namely teaching, research, and service. According to Ramos-Monge et al. (2017), USR is explained as the capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) to disseminate and implement a set of principles, and general and specific values aimed at enhancing the educational and social challenges of society through four key processes: management, teaching, research, and extension. Kouatli (2018) highlights the role of universities in facilitating sustainability through USR by serving as intermediaries between businesses and society's environmental needs. Taken together, these definitions of USR indicate a more expansive function for universities, extending beyond traditional education and research. USR underscores the universities' roles in addressing real-world challenges like economic, social, and environmental crises.

The understanding of USR is fundamental as it differs in focus, extent, and action of universities. In developed countries, most USR initiatives are designed to address long-term core values, such as organizational governance and curriculum development. In contrast, universities in developing nations tend to prefer short-term programs that prioritize addressing issues with immediate and tangible impacts on local communities. This often involves engaging in philanthropic activities aimed at enhancing the university's reputation (Huang & Do, 2021). Further, Leal Filho et al. (2019) assert that economic issues take precedence for HEIs, both in practical implementation and theoretical framework, followed by social and environmental

concerns. In addition, USR is also deemed a key driver in advancing national agendas. For instance, In the Philippines, the Asian Institute of Management offers courses aimed at social entrepreneurship to help address economic challenges faced by the country (Abu Osman, 2023). Meanwhile, in the United Arab Emirates, the Khalifa University of Science and Technology has developed innovative solutions that have helped the country become a global leader in renewable energy (Bojarajan et al., 2024).

As an introduction, Malaysia's higher education system has rapidly progressed, extending its benefits to individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds, in an effort to ensure equal access to tertiary education. As shown in *Figure 1*, the Malaysian higher education landscape is defined by its array of public and private institutions, comprising over 20 state universities, 36 polytechnics, 105 community colleges, and 450 private institutions and colleges throughout the entirety of the nation (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022). With a multitude of public and private universities in Malaysia, USR has gained prominence due to the emphasis on world-ranking platforms and dynamic transformation (Chan & Mohd Hassan, 2018).

Figure 1. Higher Education Institutions under the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia

Source: *Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2022)*
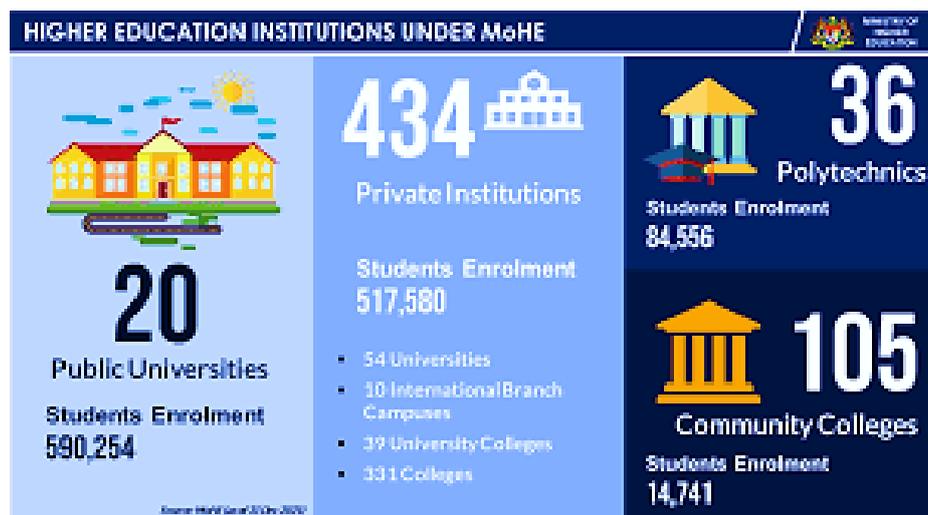
A study by Othman and Othman (2018) revealed that public and private universities in Malaysia prioritize distinct aspects of social responsibility. Public universities tend to focus on the well-being of their existing staff and students, such as providing more opportunities for employee promotion and upgrading teaching and learning facilities. In contrast, private universities place greater emphasis on external stakeholders of the university and the university's long-term development, such as through educational outreach programs for primary and secondary school students. Furthermore, Mohd Hasan (2017) revealed that universities in Malaysia place a strong emphasis on community-driven CSR practices. Senin et al. (2019) affirmed this fact in their studies, which highlighted the involvement of Malaysian universities in sharing knowledge and expertise with the community regarding the use of technology in daily life. According to the findings of Rahman et al. (2019) which examined CSR program involvement in six public universities in Malaysia, the university's engagement in CSR practices is significantly shaped by its operational structure. This suggests that Malaysian university's structure, policies, and decision-making processes have a substantial impact on their USR initiatives. In summary, both public and private universities in Malaysia play crucial roles in societal development despite

the difference in approach to social responsibility. Ultimately, the combined endeavours substantially contribute to the overall enhancement of the country.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal set of goals, targets, and indicators adopted by the United Nations in September 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets aim to address five critical areas by 2030: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership (United Nations, n.d.). Collectively, these goals represent a shared vision for a more sustainable and fairer world that transcends geographical boundaries and emphasizes the collective responsibility of nations, organizations, and individuals alike. As successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are expected to do better in addressing issues of sustainability. The SDGs framework is intended to be global, going far beyond the limits of the MDGs, and the conventional "three-pillar" approach to sustainable development, calls for integrative strategies that combine environmental sustainability and human development (Kumar et al., 2016).

Out of the 193 UN member states, Malaysia ranked 78th in the 2022 SDG Performance Index, achieving 69.9% of the total score. This score reflects the country's progress across all 17 SDGs, where 100% represents the full achievement of all (United Nations, 2023). According to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023, ***Figure 2*** illustrates the trends of all 17 SDGs in Malaysia. The country is making notable progress in achieving SDG 1 (No Poverty) while sustaining its previous accomplishments. Malaysia is also experiencing moderate advancements in several other areas, including SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). However, progress on the remaining SDGs has stagnated, indicating a lack of significant changes in Malaysia's efforts to achieve these goals.

Figure 2. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals Trend in Malaysia

Source: United Nations (2023)

Universities, given their extensive involvement in generating and disseminating knowledge, have always been powerful drivers of global and national development. The United Nations recognizes its distinctive expertise as essential in addressing the interconnected social, economic, and environmental challenges presented by the SDGs. The contributions of universities to the SDGs span four key areas: education, research, operations, and societal engagement (Setó-Pamies & Papaoikonomou, 2020). Although USR and SDG have different

theoretical underpinnings, both share a common dedication to addressing economic, social, and environmental responsibilities. This shared emphasis on the three dimensions serves as the unifying factor between these two concepts, even though their approaches vary (Bokhari, 2017).

This research seeks to explore the role of USR initiatives in achieving sustainable development in Malaysia, utilizing Carroll's Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a guiding framework. As a prominent model in the field, Carroll's CSR Pyramid provides a structured approach to defining and contextualizing business responsibilities (Visser, 2006). A Google Images search for "Carroll's Pyramid of CSR" uncovers well over 100 variants and copies of the model, with more than 5,200 citations of the original article listed on Google Scholar (Carroll, 2016). Therefore, corporate social responsibility, as defined by Carroll (1979), encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organizations. The pyramid's four-part definitional structure is illustrated in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3. Carroll's CSR Pyramid

Source: Carroll (2016)

This study uses the Pyramid as a framework to assess how universities, through USR initiatives, meet their social responsibilities and align with the SDGs. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities, the model encourages universities to adopt a comprehensive approach to social commitments, positioning them as leaders in promoting the SDGs.

Hence, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the USR initiatives carried out in Malaysian universities?
2. How do Malaysian universities align their USR initiatives with Carroll's CSR Pyramid?
3. How do USR initiatives in Malaysian universities align with the achievement of SDGs?

A qualitative content analysis of the official websites of the Top 15 Malaysian universities as listed in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking 2023 was carried out to explore the role that USR initiatives in attaining sustainable development in Malaysia. The findings show a significant growth in USR efforts that are consistent with Carroll's economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic duties, as well as strong institutional and policy support for sustainability. The majority of USR projects are intended to address global concerns highlighted in the United Nations' 17 SDGs. This research enhances the understanding of the Carroll Model in the context of Malaysian universities and provides practical guidance for universities, policymakers, and stakeholders on effective strategies to foster sustainability through USR initiatives. The paper is organized to present the introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussions on theoretical and practical implications, and ends with a conclusion.

2. Literature review

As an introduction, the notion of "social responsibility" was predominantly linked to businesses and their efforts to enhance societal well-being (Ramos-Monge et al., 2017). The focus centred on how businesses, especially large multinational corporations, could utilize CSR to mitigate the environmental impact, ensure equitable labour practices (Asemah et al., 2013), and engage in philanthropic endeavours for societal benefit (Carroll, 1991). Concurrently, CSR serves as a crucial tool for gaining competitive advantages, fostering creativity and innovation, and strengthening a company's reputation with its customers, employees, business partners, governmental organizations, and non-profit groups (Nimani et al., 2022).

Over the decades, the importance of CSR has grown, and according to Hwang et al. (2020), it is now almost a requirement for every business entity in the world. Carroll (2016) added that CSR initiatives are gaining prominence across all industries and economic sectors, with higher education institutions showing a growing interest in carrying out these strategies. Inevitably, universities are now integral to the growing conversation about corporate social responsibility (CSR), raising important concerns about their role in societal advancement and environmental stewardship (Ismail & Shujaat, 2019).

University Social Responsibility, commonly abbreviated as USR, was introduced in the early 2000s to extend the traditional mission of universities in an endeavour to develop solutions for economic, social, and environmental problems in society (Sharma & Sharma, 2019). Fundamentally, it is a collaborative effort to align the Third Mission of the university with community needs (Cosenz, 2022). This collaboration brings together a diverse set of stakeholders, including local businesses, government agencies, non-profit organisations, and communities to boost progress and prosperity.

Drawing from Carroll's CSR Pyramid, universities are accountable for economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Economic responsibility involves efficient resource allocation, revenue generation, and sound financial decision-making to sustain community engagement initiatives (Bastos et al., 2019). Legal responsibility, on the other hand, is demonstrated by compliance with federal, state, and local regulations (Bastos et al., 2019). Ethical responsibility emphasizes upholding ethical standards and principles across all university activities, from research to community outreach (Bastos et al., 2019). Philanthropic responsibility, lastly, is reflected in voluntary initiatives that contribute to societal well-being through the sharing of resources and expertise (Bastos et al., 2019).

Ultimately, these USR initiatives contribute to sustainable development by addressing critical social, economic, and environmental issues outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a significant pillar of society, universities play an important role in the pursuit of sustainable development in the modern era. Universities have the potential to become active agents of economic growth and sustainable development. through a variety of means, such as: (1) promoting public dialogue; (2) disseminating information on scientific and technological developments; (3) encouraging cooperation between various stakeholders (including legislators, corporate executives, university officials, and members of the public); and (4) propelling socioeconomic progress (Qazi et al., 2021).

As illustrated in *Figure 4*, Carroll's CSR Pyramid serves as the framework for assessing the implementation of USR initiatives in Malaysian universities. Renowned for its four pillars—economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities—the Carroll Model provides a structured approach to guiding universities in fulfilling their social obligations (Carroll, 2016). This research expands the model's traditional application by integrating the SDGs into the evaluation of USR, thereby fostering a holistic view of the universities' roles as catalysts for societal change.

Figure 4. Conceptual Framework
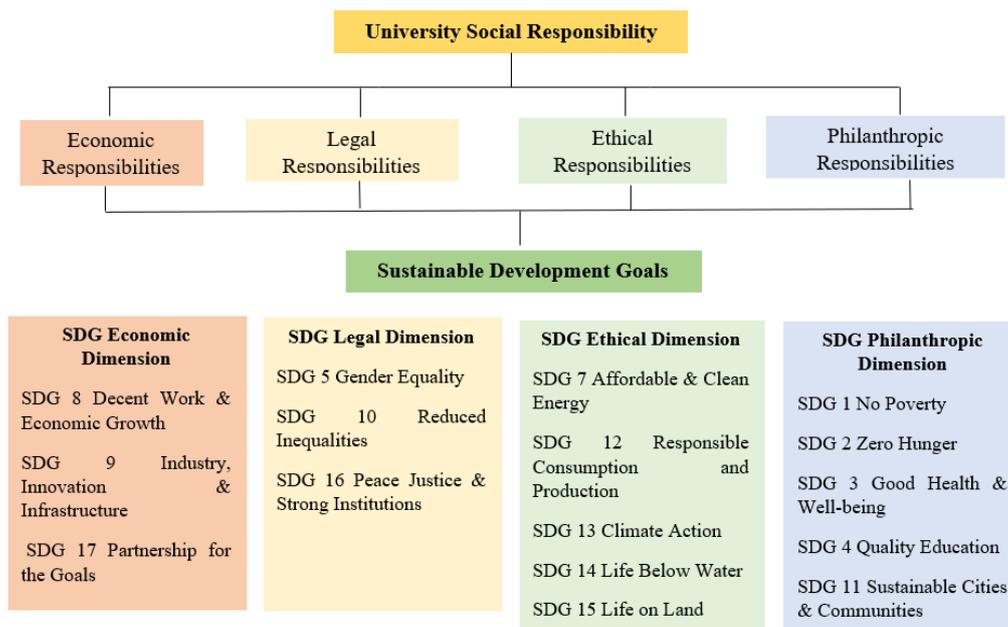
Source: own work

3. Methodology

This study employed qualitative content analysis to explore the role of USR initiatives in achieving sustainable development in Malaysia. The sample comprised the top 15 Malaysian universities listed in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking for 2023. The THE Impact Ranking is widely acknowledged as a benchmark for sustainability efforts in higher education, evaluating universities based on their contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching (Times Higher Education, n.d.).

In this study, all USR-related initiatives published on the official websites—specifically the USR/CSR and Sustainability Homepages—of the selected universities were collected during July and August 2023. The term "initiatives" refers to various USR-related activities and projects, including articles, news reports, annual reports, announcements, individual posts, and listings. The research involved the top 15 Malaysian universities listed in the THE Impact Ranking for 2023, yielding between 25 and 35 USR-related initiatives from each institution, as presented in *Table 1*. This range was established due to data saturation, where no new relevant information was emerging after the collection of these initiatives.

Table 1. Listing of USR Initiatives from the Top 15 Malaysian Universities in the THE Impact Ranking 2023

University	No. of Initiatives Cited from University Social Responsibility Homepage	No. of Initiatives Cited from University Sustainable Development Goals Homepage	Total No. of Initiatives
Universiti Sains Malaysia	0	35	35
Universiti Malaya	28	6	34
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	0	30	30
Universiti Teknologi MARA	5	28	33
Universiti Putra Malaysia	18	14	32
Universiti Malaysia Pahang	7	26	33
Sunway University	0	32	32
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman	9	22	31
University of Cyberjaya	0	32	32
Universiti Kebangasaan Malaysia	7	24	31
Universti Malaysia Perlis	2	28	30
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak	22	13	35
Management & Science University	23	10	33
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris	4	18	22
Universiti Utara Malaysia	5	23	27

Source: Research Data, 2023

To enhance the validity of the data, two researchers independently coded the USR initiatives. During each coding session, the researchers adhered to established coding guidelines, coding data segments without reference to prior coding to maintain objectivity. The coding results were expected to align closely; any discrepancies identified were subsequently resolved to reinforce data quality for the thematic analysis.

4. Research Results

The study indicates that all Malaysian universities possess user-friendly and fully functional websites that effectively showcase their socially responsible initiatives. Typically, USR-related information can be found under sections labelled 'Social Responsibility,' 'Sustainability,' or similar headings.

The analysis demonstrates that USR is gaining traction in Malaysia, with public and private universities increasingly acknowledging their societal responsibilities. Each institution has adopted its unique focus, extent, and approach to USR initiatives, resulting in a diverse engagement. This variation not only enriches the overall impact of USR in Malaysia but also allows for innovative solutions to emerge that cater to the specific needs of different communities. *Table 2* summarizes the USR focuses of the top 15 Malaysian universities listed in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking 2023.

Table 2. The USR focus of the Top 15 Malaysian Universities in THE Impact Ranking 2023

University	USR Focus
Universiti Sains Malaysia	Poverty Alleviation Initiative
Universiti Malaya	Energy Sustainability Empowerment
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	Energy Sustainability Empowerment
Universiti Teknologi MARA	Energy Sustainability Empowerment
Universiti Putra Malaysia	Poverty Alleviation Initiative
Universiti Malaysia Pahang	Poverty Alleviation Initiative
Sunway University	Sustainable Water Management
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman	Educational Outreach Programs
University of Cyberjaya	Poverty Alleviation Initiative
Universiti Kebangasaan Malaysia	Poverty Alleviation Initiative
Universti Malaysia Perlis	Poverty Alleviation Initiative
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak	Educational Outreach Programs
Management & Science University	Health Enhancement Initiatives
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris	Energy Sustainability Empowerment
Universiti Utara Malaysia	Educational Outreach Programs

Source: Own research

The six USR focuses adopted by Malaysian universities strategically address the pressing issues outlined in the SDGs, thereby contributing to a more sustainable and equitable future for the country. The USR initiatives of public and private universities in Malaysia effectively overlap and complement each other, collaboratively addressing societal and environmental challenges. Notably, the unique USR focus of each university aligns with its specific niche, locality, and social impact, showcasing a tailored approach to addressing the diverse needs of its communities.

The majority of universities, including Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, place a strong emphasis on poverty reduction. Energy sustainability measures are the second most widely adopted topic, with some universities, like Universiti Malaya and Universiti Teknologi MARA, prioritising them. Furthermore, the table identifies educational outreach projects as a key priority for Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Universiti Utara

Malaysia. Unique efforts, such as sustainable water management at Sunway University and health-improvement activities at Management & Science University, highlight the breadth of these universities' societal responsibilities.

4.1 USR Initiatives in Malaysia

The study found that Malaysian institutions are strongly committed to USR, particularly emphasizing community-based programs. This focus not only reflects their awareness of societal needs but also highlights their strategic role in addressing local challenges. ***Table 3*** demonstrates the Top 15 most common USR initiatives in Malaysia.

As the apex of academic excellence, universities maximize their capacity for knowledge production and technical advancement, making knowledge and technology exchange initiatives the most popular type of USR in Malaysia. This strategy promotes collaborative innovation and problem-solving in addition to facilitating the transfer of important skills to local communities, ultimately enhancing community livelihoods. Besides, organizing fundraising efforts and donating essential items to the underprivileged has emerged as a prevalent USR initiative among Malaysian universities. This approach is not only straightforward and manageable for university members at all levels but also significantly effective in alleviating poverty. Another common USR initiative in Malaysia includes educational outreach programs for primary and secondary school students. By collaborating with local schools, universities may provide essential resources, mentorship, and academic support, bridging the educational gap and inspiring students to pursue higher education. Additionally, there are a few areas where USR initiatives are less commonly observed in Malaysia however worth denoting, such as senior citizens' engagement programs, animal welfare protection, and the preservation of national heritage buildings. Overall, these initiatives reflect a multifaceted approach to USR, emphasizing universities' roles as change agents in solving Malaysia's social, economic, and environmental concerns.

Table 3. The Top 15 most common USR initiatives in Malaysia

No.	USR Initiatives
1.	Exchange Knowledge & Technologies with the Community
2.	Organize Fundraising Efforts and Donate Food and Daily Essentials to the Underprivileged
3.	Conduct Educational Outreach Programs for Primary and Secondary School Students
4.	Organize Community Service Projects and Activities for Environmental Conservation
5.	Organise Physical and Psychological Health Awareness Campaign
6.	Empower Students with Vital Job Skills through Diverse Training Programs
7.	Provide Student Scholarship & Financial Support
8.	Pursue Sustainability-Oriented Research and Innovation
9.	Conduct Aboriginal/ Rural Community Empowerment Program
10.	Establish Sustainable Campus Landscaping and Infrastructure
11.	Practice Green Mobility on Campus
12.	Ensure Sustainable Energy Management
13.	Formulate an On-Campus Food Support Program
14.	Establish Disability-Accessible Facilities on Campus
15.	Uphold Ethical Conduct and Transparency On & Off-campus

Source: Own research

4.2 The alignment of USR initiatives with Carroll's CSR Pyramid

As an overview, USR in Malaysia aligns with Carroll's CSR Pyramid, indicating a comprehensive strategy for addressing societal needs and sustainability concerns. A summary of USR Initiatives in Malaysian Universities from primary research findings data is presented in *Table 4*.

Table 4. Overview of USR Engagement by Universities in Malaysia

Economic Responsibilities	Legal Responsibilities
1. Exchange Knowledge & Technologies with the Community 2. Pursue Sustainability-Oriented Research and Innovation 3. Create Local and Global Partnerships for Social Responsibility Programs 4. Empower Students with Vital Job Skills Through Diverse Training Programs	1. Prevention of Discrimination Practices 2. Establish Disability-Accessible Facilities on Campus 3. Adherence to Environmental Policies
Ethical Responsibilities	**Philanthropic Responsibilities**
1. Commit to Social Responsibility Reporting 2. Establish Sustainable Campus Landscaping and Infrastructure 3. Incorporate Sustainable Development Education Across Disciplines 4. Protect and Conserve Aquatic Ecosystems 5. Upcycle Organic Waste into Composted Material 6. Practice Green Mobility	1. Provide Student Scholarship & Financial Support 2. Formulate an On-Campus Food Support Program 3. Volunteer in Flood Relief Efforts 4. Donate Food and Daily Essentials to the Underprivileged Community 5. Kickstart Local Tree Planting Initiative 6. Host Training Sessions, Seminars, and Outreach Programs to Promote Environmental Awareness and Sustainability 7. Conduct Educational Outreach Programs for Primary and Secondary School Students 8. Conduct Aboriginal/ Rural Community Educational Empowerment Program 9. Organise Physical and Psychological Health Awareness Campaign 10. Organize Fundraising Efforts

Source: Own research

Notably, philanthropic responsibilities take precedence as the primary area of focus for universities in Malaysia, with the majority of USR initiatives falling in this category. This underscores the universities' commitment to societal betterment and their role as catalysts for positive change within their communities. Overall, while Malaysian institutions are making substantial progress towards alignment with Carroll's CSR Pyramid, a more balanced emphasis on all four duties is required to fully realize their potential impact on sustainable development. The upcoming paragraphs describe the alignment of USR initiatives in Malaysia according to Carroll's CSR Pyramid.
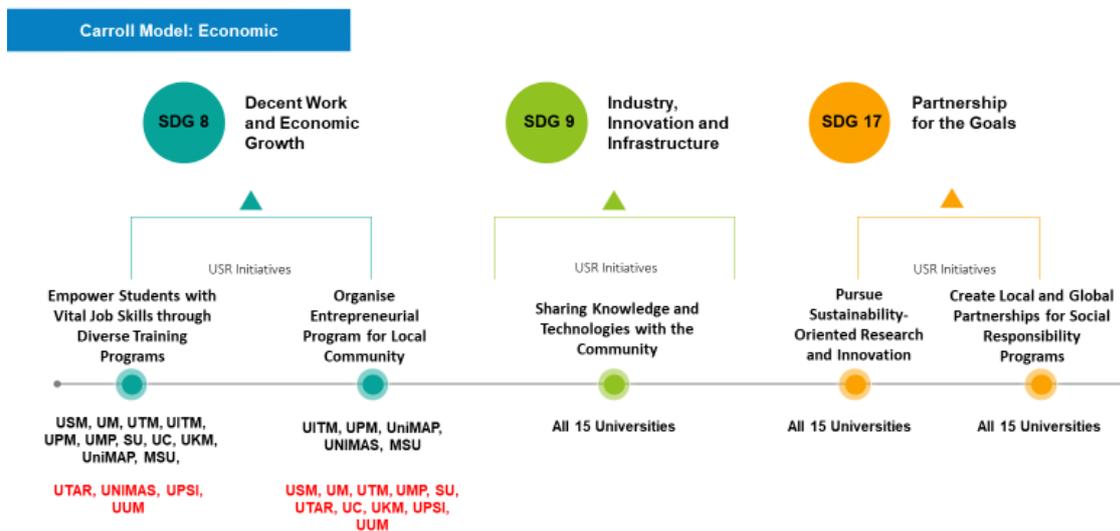
4.2.1 Economic Responsibility of USR Initiatives by Malaysian Universities

Starting with the foundational level of Carroll's CSR Pyramid, economic responsibility, *Figure 5* illustrates the emphasis of Malaysian universities on four key USR initiatives.

Firstly, the majority of these universities actively engage in knowledge and technology transfer programs with their local communities. For instance, universities like Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak host entrepreneurial

training sessions, seminars, and outreach programs for the local community. Additionally, universities like Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Sunway University, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, and Management Science University provide technologies to enable the implementation of sustainable renewable energy practices, including solar and water solutions among the local communities. Secondly, to create high-impact social responsibility programs, universities in Malaysia establish local and global partnerships. For example, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia is a member of the "Malaysia Sustainable University Campus Network" known as MYSUN, and ASEAN University Network / Southeast Asia Engineering Education Development Network (AUN/SEED-Net). Thirdly, this study depicts the commitment of all the universities in Malaysia to pursue sustainability-oriented research and innovation for local community advancement. Recently, the "Self-Cleaning Ultrafiltration System" invention by Sunway University was awarded the world's best project to demonstrate engineering excellence in water use, clean-up, and reuse by The Institution of Chemical Engineers. Finally, as part of the universities' efforts to fulfil their economic responsibility, various initiatives, such as student entrepreneurial events, career fairs, and educational exhibitions, were carried out by a majority of Malaysian universities to empower students with essential and diverse job skills. As an example, Universiti Sains Malaysia established Siswa Niaga, a student business building to polish students' entrepreneurship skills. In addition to that, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman offer micro-credential courses for students to equip themselves with various industrial skills such as executive development courses and professional certification with industry partners.

Figure 5. USR Initiatives on Economic Dimension Practices by Universities in Malaysia

Source: Own research

4.2.2 Legal Responsibility of USR Initiatives by Malaysian Universities

Building on the second level of Carroll's CSR Pyramid, legal responsibility, *Figure 6* depicts how Malaysian universities enforce compliance with laws and regulations through structured USR efforts.

Firstly, prevention of discrimination practices. Some of the USR initiatives include the advocation of a gender equality program and the enforcement of a non-discrimination policy. This is in line with the Federal Constitution of Malaysia 1963, as amended in 2019. Secondly,

the establishment of disability-accessible facilities across Malaysian universities reflects their adherence to Section 28(1) of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008. This legislation underscores the right of individuals with disabilities to access all levels of education without discrimination based on their impairment. Hence, universities in Malaysia offer a range of disability-accessible facilities on their campuses, including ramps, lifts, accessible libraries, and assistive technologies. Not only that, but some universities also take the initiative to organise awareness campaigns on disability. These campaigns often seek to promote inclusivity, reduce stigmatization, and improve support and compassion for individuals with disabilities. Finally, Malaysian universities adhere to the Malaysia Environmental Quality Act of 1974 as part of their dedication to legal responsibility. These USR initiatives encompass the enforcement of waste management, environmental sustainability, and energy-saving policies on their campuses. These endeavours demonstrate the universities' commitment to addressing environmental concerns and safeguarding the environment.

Figure 6. USR Initiatives on Legal Dimension Practices by Universities in Malaysia
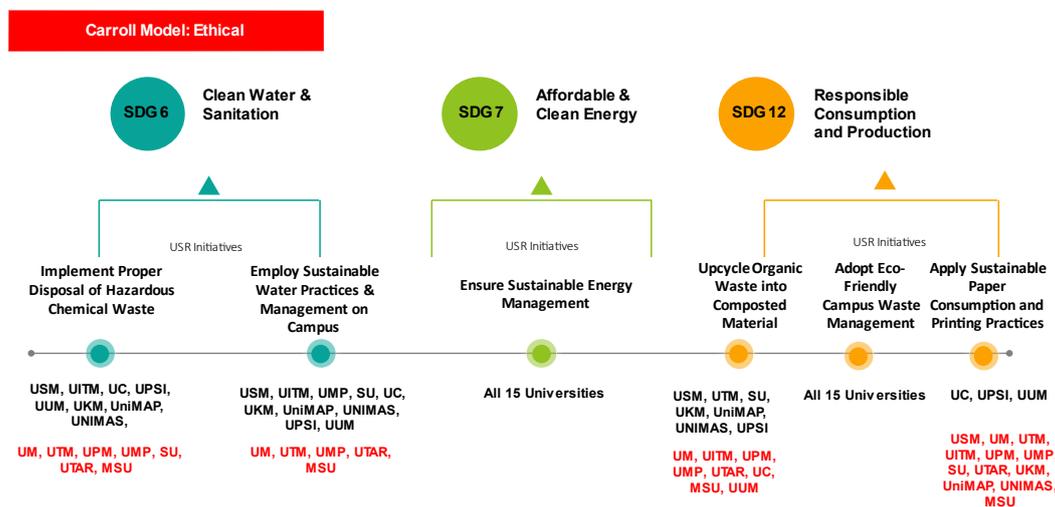

Source: Own research

4.2.3 Ethical Responsibility of USR Initiatives by Malaysian Universities

Moving onto the third tier, ethical responsibility, *Figure 7* highlights Malaysian institutions' adherence to ethical standards and moral commitments in their USR activities.

Firstly, commitment to social responsibility reporting in which all the USR initiatives carried out are posted on the university website. The study reveals that all Malaysian universities maintain user-friendly and fully functional websites that provide information about their socially responsible initiatives. Typically, USR-related information is featured under a website tab titled 'Green Campus', 'University Sustainability Centre', 'Sustainability', 'Lestari', 'SDG', or a similar label. The majority of the universities consolidate information related to USR initiatives under the 'Sustainability' or 'SDG' tab except Universiti Malaya and Management Science University which have designated websites namely UMcares and MSU Community Outreach. Sunway University, on the other hand, dedicated an official University e-Bulletin, Campus with a Conscience (CWAC) to broadcast on-campus events and programs related to sustainability. Secondly, Malaysian universities establish sustainable campus landscaping and infrastructure as part of their USR initiatives. For instance, Pocket Park @

Universiti Sains Malaysia is an initiative aimed at developing a park filled with specific tree species to preserve the greenery around the campus. Similarly, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, and Universiti Utara Malaysia use natural landscaping and urban garden to enhance biodiversity on their campuses. Additionally, universities in Malaysia have energy-efficient buildings equipped with Light-Emitting Diode (LED) lighting and smart Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems to reduce energy consumption. Lastly, the incorporation of Sustainable Development Education across disciplines. Students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to address sustainability challenges in their respective fields. Also, through sustainability education students learned about the ethical dimensions of sustainability, including equity, social justice, and responsible citizenship to contribute to a more sustainable world.

Figure 7. USR Initiatives on Ethical Dimension Practices by Universities in Malaysia
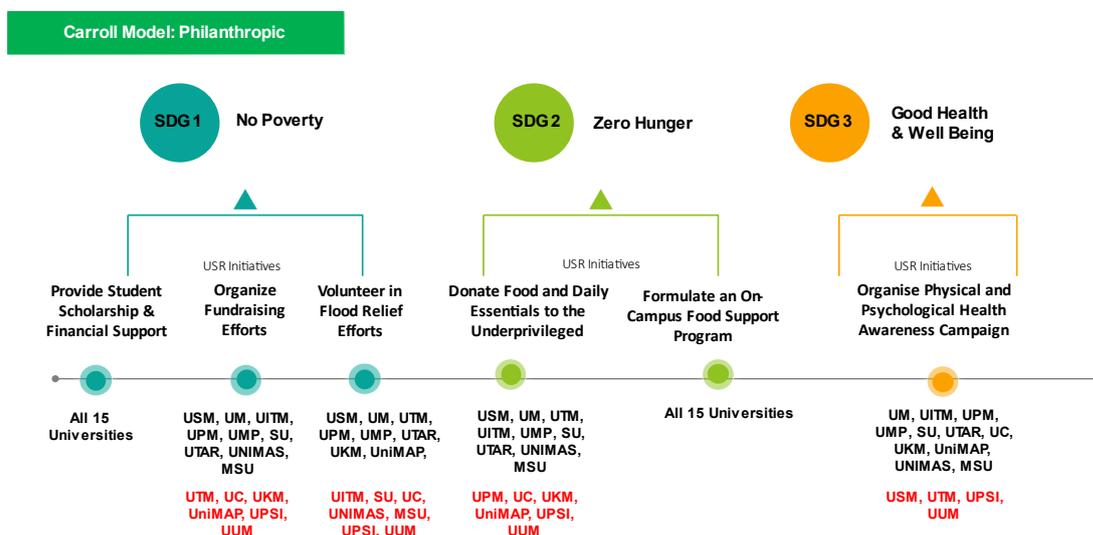

Source: own research

4.2.4 Philanthropic Responsibility of USR Initiatives by Malaysian Universities

Last but not least, at the top of the pyramid, are philanthropic responsibilities, *Figure 8* illustrates the voluntary USR initiatives that exceed economic, legal, and ethical expectations.

Firstly, Malaysian universities offer comprehensive financial assistance for students in need through scholarships, tuition waivers, and specialised aid programs for students with disabilities. These programs aim to help students cover the costs of tuition, fees, books, living expenses, and other educational-related expenses. Secondly, Malaysian universities formulate an on-campus food support program as a measure to alleviate poverty and ensure all students have access to nutritious food. The initiatives include the distribution of free 'Bubur Lambuk' during the Muslim fasting month at Management Science University and the introduction of 'Menu Siswa Rahmah' at all 20 public universities and polytechnics in Malaysia, where students can purchase meals for as low as RM 3.50. Additionally, there is the establishment of Food Banks at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, University of Cyberjaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, and Universiti Utara Malaysia. Thirdly, members of universities in Malaysia often volunteer in flood relief efforts such as donations, medical assistance, and post-flood cleaning

as part of giving back to the community. As an illustration, Universiti Sains Malaysia organised a yearly flood aid mission named "Misi Insani". Fourthly, one of the common USR initiatives in Malaysia that falls under philanthropic responsibilities is the donation of food and daily essentials to the underprivileged community. Lastly, Malaysian universities also launch reforestation projects to accomplish their philanthropic responsibilities. For instance, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sunway University, University of Cyberjaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Management Science University, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, implement tree planting campaigns, including initiatives like the Mangrove Tree planting project, across the country.

Figure 8. USR Initiatives on Philanthropic Dimension Practices by Universities in Malaysia

Source: Own research

4.3 The connection of USR initiatives in Malaysian universities in achieving SDGs

Overall, the findings of the study revealed a link between USR initiatives in Malaysia in achieving SDGs. It is evident that Malaysian universities significantly contribute to the SDGs through four key areas: education, research, operations, and societal engagement. These efforts serve as an important connection between the academic community and larger socioeconomic and environmental issues.

First, USR initiatives empower students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to actively participate in and contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. Education is a critical means of supporting and accelerating "glocal" (global and local) capacity to implement the SDGs. By incorporating the SDGs into the university's educational programs, students can familiarize themselves with the principles and objectives of these global goals. Also, this integration fosters awareness, deepens their understanding, and cultivates a strong commitment to addressing these pressing global challenges. As an illustration, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Sunway University, and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak integrate education for sustainable development (ESD) into courses in all relevant disciplines. This effort contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) because ESD enhances the quality of education by promoting sustainability knowledge and skills across various disciplines. In addition, SDG 17

(Partnership for Goals) is also achieved as it encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships in education for sustainable development.

Second, USR initiatives encourage universities to prioritize research that aligns with the SDGs, thus providing not only theoretical knowledge but practical and tangible contributions to sustainable development. This research encompasses diverse areas, from environmental conservation to healthcare access, poverty alleviation, and economic development. All of the universities examined in this study are dedicated to pursuing sustainability-focused research and innovation. This commitment has led to the expansion of knowledge in the academic world and various tangible contributions. As an example, in pursuit of sustainable energy management and policy, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia took a pioneering step by founding the Fuel Cell Institute. Meanwhile, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Malaya create living labs for sustainability research purposes. This effort contributes to multiple SDGs mainly SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Third, USR initiatives drive universities to be exemplars of sustainability and social responsibility through their operational practices. By adopting energy-efficient, waste-reducing, and responsible governance measures, universities inspire a culture of sustainability within their communities, setting a positive example for students, faculty, staff, and the broader public. As evidence, all the top 15 universities studied practice green mobility on campus to minimize energy consumption and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Another example comprises the establishment of UM Circular Economy Living Labs by Universiti Malaya to create a more integrated, inclusive, and low-carbon campus waste management system. Meanwhile, several other universities like Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Sunway University, the University of Cyberjaya, and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia adopt eco-friendly waste management practices on their campuses by upcycling organic waste into compost materials. All these USR efforts combined contributed significantly to various SDGs namely SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Last but not least, USR initiatives promote the advancement of SDGs beyond their campuses through social engagement. This entails active participation in USR initiatives, and collaborating with government agencies, businesses, non-profit organizations, and local communities to address complex societal challenges. For instance, organize fundraising efforts, donate food and daily essentials to the underprivileged, engage with the aborigines or rural communities, conduct physical and psychological health awareness campaigns, and organize community service projects for environmental conservation. These USR initiatives help to achieve SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). Main results are summarized in *Figure 9*.

Figure 9. Overview and Summary of the Carroll Model Dimensions Attainment by Malaysian Universities
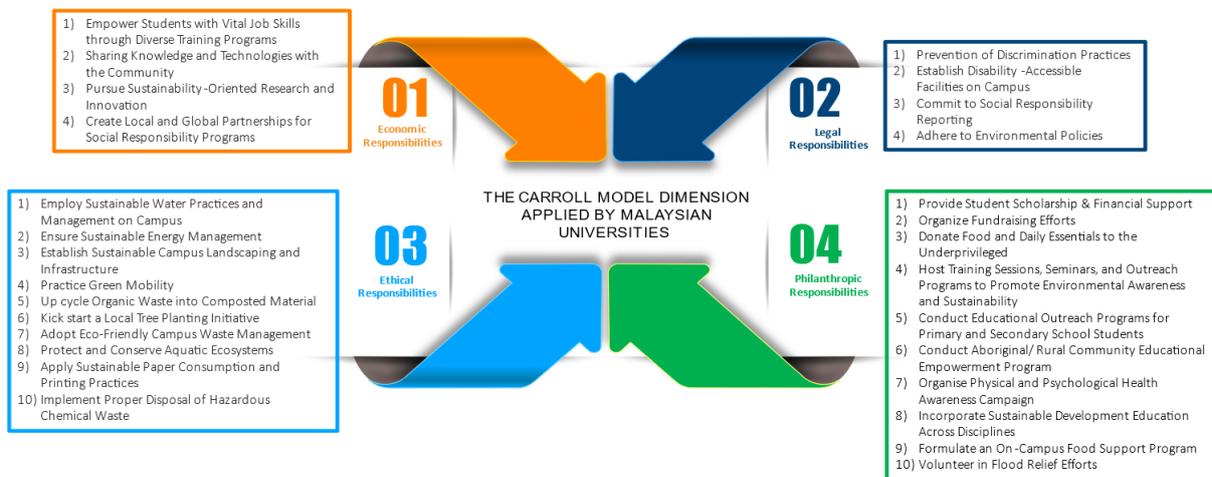
Source: Research results

7. Conclusions

The findings above fulfil the objective of this study, which is to explore the implementation and role of USR initiatives within the framework of Carroll's Model and their alignment with sustainable development in Malaysia.

Firstly, the research has identified the most common USR initiatives in Malaysia, with the most prevalent being the exchange of knowledge and technologies with the community. This finding underscores the universities' dedication to uplifting and empowering the local community by providing valuable information and innovations, thereby contributing to economic growth and societal progress. Furthermore, this initiative aligns with the universities' educational mission and central role as an educational hub (Taliento, 2022). Significantly, the prevalence of these USR initiatives varies following the distinct objectives and interests of individual universities (Nejati et al., 2011).

Secondly, philanthropic responsibilities take precedence as the primary focus for Malaysian universities, with the majority of their USR initiatives directed towards promoting the welfare of others, including charitable donations, volunteer work, and community involvement. It is more feasible for universities in Malaysia to engage in philanthropic initiatives due to the availability of resources, such as funds, facilities, and personnel, as compared to resources required for other responsibilities. In addition to that, philanthropic initiatives give universities highly visible possibilities to make a beneficial impact on their communities and society at large (Alzyoud & Bani-Hani, 2015). Nonetheless, it's important to note that the prevalence of philanthropic responsibilities doesn't imply that ethical, economic, and legal responsibilities are being ignored. Instead, the degree of emphasis on each area may vary due to the vision and mission of the universities.

Finally, the research highlights the association and contribution of USR initiatives towards achieving sustainable development in Malaysia. In line with the universities' focus on fulfilling philanthropic responsibilities through USR initiatives, most of the USR initiatives in 2023 focus

on poverty alleviation through the donation of food and daily essentials to the underprivileged, establishing a food bank on campus, and providing financial assistance for the students. As a result, universities' actions are contributing to Malaysia's positive performance in addressing poverty-related issues as outlined in the Sustainable Development Report. In conclusion, Malaysia's emphasis on SDG 1 (No Poverty) reflects both the country's global commitment to the SDGs and its national priorities in economic development, social fairness, and poverty reduction.

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of USR initiatives in Malaysia within the framework of the Carroll Model, shedding light on the multifaceted roles that universities play in advancing sustainable development in the country. The findings of this research highlight the diverse array of initiatives undertaken by Malaysian universities, encompassing ethical, philanthropic, legal, and economic responsibilities. Significantly, philanthropic responsibilities emerge as the most prominent aspects of USR in Malaysian universities. These responsibilities demonstrate the university's commitment to giving back to the community and making a positive impact on the lives of individuals and communities in need. It encompasses initiatives such as charitable donations, community outreach programs, and environmental preservation. The study also underscores the importance of universities in addressing environmental, social, and economic challenges, aligning with global sustainability goals and ethical standards. Therefore, Malaysian universities are expected to proactively engage in the pursuit of SDGs through the framework of USR as outlined by Carroll's Model.

However, it is worth noting that while universities in Malaysia are actively addressing numerous facets of social responsibility, there are areas with potential for further growth, such as senior citizens' engagement programs, animal welfare protection efforts, and the preservation of national heritage buildings. These areas can be explored to enhance the overall impact of USR initiatives. While the current study has successfully identified the centrality of USR in Malaysia, the study lacks generalizability. The findings presented in this study are context-specific to the Malaysian setting and may not be easily generalizable to larger populations or different settings. Therefore, is it recommended for follow-up studies in different contexts and settings.

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