



# Empowering Future Leaders: Advancing the SDGs through University-Led Student Initiatives for Enduring Relevance in Higher Education



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## EmPOWER Programme Heriot Watt University Malaysia: Building Flourishing Communities

### INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly complex and uncertain world, universities play a vital role in cultivating not only academic knowledge but also purpose, adaptability, and practical skills to prepare students for meaningful societal engagement (Mustakova, Basseches and Sadowski, 2022; Madsen and Overgaard, 2019).

Heriot-Watt University Malaysia’s EmPOWER Programme responds to this imperative through its 2024 IMPACT Projects, themed Building Flourishing Communities (Heriot-Watt University Malaysia, n.d.). In collaboration with a range of strategic partners (see Table 1), students engage in real-world projects addressing pressing societal issues such as access to education, disability inclusion, animal welfare, and affordable housing (Citizen Journal, 2024).

Aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these initiatives aim to foster leadership, resilience, and civic responsibility, ensuring that students’ learning experiences are relevant, purpose-driven, and impactful well beyond graduation (Bourn and Rittell, 2017; Madsen and Overgaard, 2019).

### OBJECTIVE

- Apply practical, transferable skills by engaging in real-world projects with industry, NGOs, and third-sector partners.
- Design and implement community initiatives that directly support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Evaluate global challenges and reflect on their roles as future leaders in an interconnected and fast-changing world.
- Demonstrate leadership and civic responsibility through impactful social and environmental actions that benefit communities.

### References

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Table 1 : Strategic Partnership

NGO	Main Focus Area	Key SDG(s)	Key Skills Developed
Malaysia Association of Blind (MAB)	Blind support and education	4 & 10	Sensitivity, volunteerism
Fugee School	Refugee education	4 & 16	Education planning, empathy
Yayasan Chow Kit (YCK)	Safe spaces for at-risk youth	1, 3 & 10	Community engagement, advocacy
Malaysia Federation of Deaf (MFD)	Deaf awareness and inclusion	3 & 10	Accessibility, diversity leadership
Seven Tea One	Inclusive employment	8 & 10	Social enterprise, empathy
Jayadiri	Vocational upskilling	1, 8 & 10	Logistics, training
Epic Homes	Indigenous housing	1 & 11	Leadership, social entrepreneurship
PAWS	Animal welfare	15	Outreach, campaigning

### ANALYSIS

#### Why These Projects Ensure Enduring Relevance

Table 2 : How EmPOWER’s NGO Partnerships Sustain Relevance in Higher Education

Element	What Students Gain	Career & Societal Impact
Skill Development	Project planning, teamwork, fundraising, stakeholder management	Directly transferable to careers
Real-World Engagement	Working with NGOs, industry partners, communities	Better readiness for professional environments
SDG Alignment	Projects map to critical global goals	Inculcates global awareness & solutions mindset
Reflection & Recognition	IMPACT Transcripts provide scripted proof of holistic skills	Makes graduates stand out to employers
Adaptive Learning	Navigating unpredictable VUCA situations	Builds resilience and flexibility

### FINDINGS

#### Academic Collaboration

HWUM Students Engage in Activities and Teach Deaf Preschool Children at Istika Jaya Kindergarten under the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf (MFD)



#### Purpose-led education

HWUM Students Organize Activities, Raise Over RM5,000 for PAWS Animal Shelter By raising over RM5,000, HWUM students are supporting PAWS in providing food, medical care, and shelter for stray and abandoned animals, while also promoting awareness of animal welfare within the community.



#### Empowering Future Leaders Through Sport and Solidarity

HWUM students organized a charity football match to raise awareness and generate financial support for the Fugees School in Kuala Lumpur, successfully raising RM7,000.



HWUM Students Volunteer at Seven Tea One an NGO dedicated to creating a safe and inclusive space for marginalized communities by providing skills training and opportunities for dignified employment.



HWUM students are promoting their fundraising posters and activities in support of Yayasan Chow Kit (YCK), a 24-hour crisis and drop-in center in Kuala Lumpur that provides meals, activities, therapy, case management, and educational programs for at-risk children and teenagers.



HWUM students are undertaking a fundraising project for the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB), which aims to empower individuals with visual impairments by providing opportunities for greater participation, inclusion, and integration into society.



HWUM students participate in Epic Homes projects, which build houses for underprivileged communities—primarily focusing on the indigenous Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. Through home construction, they help bridge the urban-rural divide and collaboratively address community challenges.

### CONCLUSION

- EmPOWER Project blends education, purpose, and community impact
- Students become changemakers, not just graduates (Table 2).
- Real-world relevance for higher education

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Embed SDGs into more academic modules
- Make crowdfunding annual & multi-campus
- Measure long-term social impact
- Promote globally to attract partnerships and collaborations