

Building human capital

Using general studies components to build the bricks of student excellence in higher education: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

 **Zarina Othman, Khalim Zainal and Khairul Anwar Mastor**

To quote the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 'Education is an important tool in building human capital'. In the educational system of Malaysia, there are two ministries that bridge the gap between the government and the people. They are the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. Education in Malaysia extends to cover government sponsored schools, private schools and even homeschooling. The government's Education Institution Category covers the national education system, which consists of:

- Pre-school education
 - An education programme for pupils aged 4–6 years
- Primary education
 - A course of study at the primary level planned for a duration of six years but which may be completed in five to seven years
 - Covered by national schools or national-type schools

- Secondary education
 - Comprising lower and upper secondary education
 - Covered by academic schools, technical and vocational schools, and religious national schools
- Post-secondary education
 - Education for individuals who have completed lower and upper secondary education, but which excludes higher education.

Schooling under the government-aided Education Institution Category covers Fully Residential schools under the authority of the Fully Residential Schools Unit of the School Division. Other education institutions established at the school level are:

- Special Education Schools under the responsibility of the Special Education Department
- Sports Schools under the responsibility of the Sports Division.



Education in Malaysia must take into account the multiracial nature of its people as a basis on which to construct a system that could integrate the differences between the ethnic groups. It is believed that, through education, unity within ethnic groups could be promoted. And thus this becomes the most important item on the agenda for this country, since unity between citizens of a country will bring about stability in its economic, social and political affairs. This system will be revised in the future in order to give fairer and holistic assessment for the students to pursue their studies. Education in Malaysia involves ongoing efforts towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce persons who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and in harmony, based on individuals' race, religion and beliefs. This effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, possess high moral standards and are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal wellbeing as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.

With respect to the current situation in the country's education system, the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education seeks to turn Malaysia into a centre of excellence in higher education. It is with this purpose that the Centre for General Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was established. Seen as a centre for building excellent students, it attempts to realise the nation's mission and vision which is to be a world class centre providing knowledge professionally to produce integrated student excellence.

The Centre offers the students four levels of course components, labelled and ranked in the order U1, U2, U3 and U4. The Centre requires students to secure 12 credit units from the first three core components, each of which offers 3 credit units, and 4 credit units from the fourth component (2 credit units for each course). These components comprise: compulsory courses (U1); liberal elective courses (U2 and U3); and language proficiency courses (U4).

All students must sit the compulsory courses (U1) which cover Asian and Islamic Civilisation Studies and Ethnic Studies. Regardless of the students' race and religion, they are all required to pass these courses in order to graduate. The essence of the U1 courses is to provide students with a basic knowledge and understanding of Islam and other Asian civilisations – to help promote better understanding between people of different cultures, beliefs and

religions. This understanding will help strengthen and maintain a level of tolerance between individuals of multi-ethnic backgrounds within Malaysian society. This reflects the stance of the newly appointed Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, when he calls for ONE Malaysia (1Malaysia).

The U2 and U3 liberal elective courses are the highlights of the Centre's offering. These components are characterised as being both the creative thinking, professional and organisational skills courses (U2) and courses that offer knowledge expansion. For a list of the subjects covered, see Table 1.

We are however in the process of reshuffling some subjects within the two categories based on our re-evaluation of the courses offered. For instance, courses such as Time Management, Personal Hygiene and Critiques of Visual Arts really belong under the U2 component (the creative thinking, professional and organisational skills courses).

The final component offered by the Centre for General Studies at UKM is Language Proficiency. In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu or the Malay language is the country's national language; and English has been acknowledged as the second language since Malaysia gained its independence. Malaysian citizens as a whole – regardless of their different ethnic backgrounds of Malay, Chinese and Indian – are exposed to the teaching and learning of both these languages in schools, beginning at kindergarten.

At the tertiary level, however, English is still important as students need credits in it in order to be awarded a degree. As for Bahasa, a particular emphasis is placed on it in relation to foreign students pursuing their postgraduate studies at UKM. Most or even all higher institutions in Malaysia continue to place emphasis on learning English despite students having been learning it at lower primary, primary and secondary education levels.

Students who enter the universities vary in their level of proficiency and this is due to several contributing factors such as the students' exposure to the language, economic status and, of course, the individual's attitude towards language learning. The challenge is even greater at this education level as it would be their 'final stop' before they exit and enter the 'real world'. English is the language medium of the private working sectors in Malaysia, not least because of the mushrooming of multinational companies. It is thus the duty and responsibility of the Centre for General Studies at

Table 1 Liberal elective courses

<p>U2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forms of Writing Human Relations Innovative Thinking Writing Skills Management of Emotion Decision-Making Skills Regional Issues Leadership and Interpersonal Skills Thinking Skills 	<p>U3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> History of Thought Comparative Ethics Scientific Development and Human Civilisation Personal Hygiene Human Rights Basic Quality Management The Environment and Health Global Ecology and Sustainable Development Family Issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Philosophy of Thinking Economic Issues Philosophy of Science Time Management History of Thought II Philosophy of Development Environment Philosophy Scientific Thinking Ethics and Moral Critiques of Visual Arts
---	---	--

UKM to equip and furnish UKM students with the required English proficiency skills regardless of which disciplines or faculties they come from. This brief scenario describes the role and significance of English language proficiency at tertiary level of Malaysian universities including UKM.

Teaching of the English language has undergone several programme restructurings since its establishment at UKM in 1970. Attempts have been made to provide the most appropriate English syllabus and structure to meet the needs of its students. UKM has adopted various approaches over the years to teach General Proficiency, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Just recently the Centre for General Studies at UKM has blown 'a wind of change' through its structure of English teaching and learning so as to equip UKM students with the necessary English language proficiency skills. It put in place two major mechanisms for teaching the English syllabus: English for Academic Communication and English for Workplace Communication. As the centre serves the whole undergraduate student population, it has decided that all students must study English for Academic Communication before progressing to the study of English for Workplace Communication, within the study slots allocated for language proficiency studies, before they leave UKM. We foresee this newly adopted structure to be key to equipping students with the skills to communicate well in English in both academic and workplace settings. It indicates the emphasis on the two components that we believe is essential to equip UKM students in Language Proficiency skills at tertiary level.

Concluding remarks

Building the bricks of student excellence requires an amalgamation of different dimensions – from knowing and appreciating the significance of interacting civilisation to the human development; celebrating and acknowledging cultural diversity among people; acquiring skills for the lifelong learning experience; expanding knowledge horizons; and mastering the national and international languages. The Centre for General Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia ensures that these fundamental aspects of education infiltrate the thoughts and practice of all students, of different subject disciplines. This is a truly challenging task but the Centre has, to date, achieved this mission. Despite being a centre, as compared to a school or a faculty, it serves almost all undergraduate students from various faculties – serving the students' total educational experience and growth. Thus, our Centre for General Studies is unique – having academic staff with multidisciplinary specialisations and as well as having students of diversified academic majors. It is greatly hoped that university students who graduate from UKM possess subject-content knowledge and expertise as well as lifelong knowledge and skills to turn them into first-class citizens of their nation and the world.

DR ZARINA OTHMAN is a senior lecturer and the Deputy Director of Language Proficiency at the Centre for General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia. She has taught English in a secondary school for boarders. Her area of expertise is in Academic Discourse.

DR KHALIM ZAINAL is a senior lecturer and the Deputy Director of Centre for General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia. Previously, Dr Khalim was a secondary school Deputy Head in Kuala Lumpur. His area of expertise is in the study of Behaviour Management in Education.

Associate Professor **DR KHAIRUL ANWAR MASTOR** is the Director of Centre for General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia. He was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in 2008. His area of expertise is in Personality Assessment and Development.

