

Learning for life

Malaysia's expectations towards Vision 2020

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The Chinese have a proverb that says learning is much like rowing upstream – those who do not push forward run the risk of drifting back. Every individual deserves the opportunity to continue advancing in his or her educational path. No one should be moored, or left to coast aimlessly, and certainly, no one should drift backward into oblivion. That the pursuit for learning should not end upon exiting the formal education system is the very premise of lifelong learning. In an economically turbulent time, this is equally important in an advanced society as it is in a developing country like Malaysia.

Enculturating learning

In November 2011, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) launched the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011–20). To be using the term 'enculturation' is quite telling – we Malaysians hope to make lifelong learning a culture, a way of life, a representation of the country's values and something that can be propagated and passed on from one generation to the next. The importance of education to support the country's economy needs no further explanation. Since the release of the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001–05) more than a decade ago, 'lifelong learning', 'knowledge-based economy', 'human capital development' and 'capacity-building' have received repeated mentions in various national plans and documents, indicating Malaysia's clear targets in order to become a developed nation by 2020.

Unfortunately, the Malaysian education system has for many years been skewed towards formal education – with national examinations, strings of 'A's and scholarships being the primary concerns of many a parent and student. Little attention was given to non-formal and informal learning, although their merit, particularly in terms of continuous professional development and work-based learning, is something that is becoming increasingly acknowledged in the larger scheme of supporting the nation's transformation plans. The release of the Blueprint is both timely and absolutely necessary.

Recognising skills acquired outside formal education

The Blueprint contains a list of recommendations to provide various stakeholders with a lifelong-learning road map – through strategies that aim to upgrade the relevant infrastructure and mechanisms; enhance public awareness and involvement; provide financial

support; as well as ensure continuity and appreciation. That said, the Blueprint's essence is the recognition of lifelong learning as the third pillar in human capital development (Figure 1). This represents a crucial step towards making lifelong learning a part of the mainstream approach towards learning and education in general. Ensuring that lifelong learning receives as much support and recognition as the school system and tertiary education will likely be the most difficult challenge to overcome.

As one of the lifelong learning stakeholders in Malaysia, Open University Malaysia (OUM) played an important role in the development of the Blueprint. OUM has been practising an open entry system (now known as 'flexible entry') since 2006, and is an official Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) national assessment centre for the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA); for which OUM has been assisting MQA in developing the system for assessing knowledge, skills and competencies that have been acquired through means other than formal education. On 16 April 2012, APEL was officially launched under MOHE. Recognising APEL as the link between non-formal/informal education and formal education is another milestone in lifelong learning, since it is APEL that will encourage people to look at their experiences and their careers from a learning perspective.

This is necessarily linked to adult education. Those within the 15–64 age bracket make up 68.4 per cent of the country's 28-million strong population. Of these, almost 65 per cent (or more than 12 million individuals) are part of the labour force. Their collective contribution to Malaysia's economy is vital to the country's ability to achieve its various national aspirations, particularly those related to economic development. Creating an avenue through which adults can gain learning opportunities will go a long way towards ensuring that Malaysians – particularly those that have the most to contribute to the nation – can embrace lifelong learning as a culture.

Setting up the road map to lifelong learning

The questions at this juncture are many. The Blueprint, as iterated earlier, is a road map. It is a guide that will hopefully drive policy changes and encourage the relevant stakeholders to take the necessary steps that will benefit the lifelong learning cause. All the stakeholders – the ministries, government agencies, polytechnics, community colleges, public and private colleges and universities, and of course, open and distance learning (ODL) institutions – are anticipated to benefit from its implementation. How Malaysia

makes use of the road map to reach its destination is something that needs careful attention. For instance, we need to consider:

- How do we create links between different qualifications and institutions?
- How do we assure quality and recognition of qualifications across different institutions?
- How can we leverage on APEL?
- How do we ensure sustainability in lifelong learning?

The possible answers to these questions will involve the roles and responsibilities of present-day post-secondary and higher education institutions, as they are the main providers of formal and non-formal lifelong learning. At present, one of the most pressing needs is to co-ordinate and integrate these various programmes so that they align to common national goals. This streamlining can help to reduce redundancies and overlaps, as well as allow for greater efficiency and an improved management of resources, expertise and facilities, from both internal and national perspectives.

Much needs to be achieved at the national level if we are to solve these problems. For instance, MQA, through the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) – the reference point for all matters related to integrating and linking qualifications in Malaysia – can establish a basis to create a continuum between qualifications (or between institutions). This means that an individual with a basic certificate or diploma from a post-secondary institution (such as a polytechnic or community college) can continue learning to upgrade their qualification to that of a Bachelor's degree by enrolling at a higher education institution via MQA's assistance and approval. Malaysia could also explore an open entry/open exit system of credit accumulation; an approach that the Open University UK has successfully implemented for many years.

Emulating best practices that have proven successful in other environments is something that Malaysia should consider in this endeavour as well. With regards to the need to create an environment that can encourage continuum in learning, it could be useful for Malaysia to look to South Korea – one of the lifelong learning success stories in Asia. South Korea has been implementing the Credit Bank System (CBS) since 1997 as an open system to recognise knowledge derived from diverse learning experiences, whether from formal or non-formal means. Malaysia's recently launched APEL will hopefully pave the way for a similar, more holistic system to be implemented nationally. Importantly, this must take into account the changing employment landscape in Malaysia, where non-formal learning (through continuous professional development or work-based learning) will be increasingly valuable. A system like the CBS can be linked to, or established under the purview of MQA, as is APEL. If properly integrated, this can also lead to a more comprehensive quality assurance system for Malaysian education – something that can further enhance the Malaysian higher education brand in the global environment.

From a national perspective, all institutions will need support from the government and the relevant ministries and agencies, particularly in terms of policy-making and provision of funds. It perhaps goes without saying that all education institutions will need to develop an understanding and work together in order to implement the various initiatives proposed in the Blueprint. The key values at this point are 'cohesion', 'co-operation', 'support' and 'synergy'. The government needs to provide the appropriate directive and encouragement if these values are to be acculturated across the education system.

OUM's contribution

From a narrower perspective, education institutions will have to review their existing objectives and functions. OUM will continue to play its role as Malaysia's leading ODL institution; where non-traditional learners, especially working adults, can gain qualifications well beyond their school- or university-going years. OUM's learner community provides the best impression that a lifelong desire to learn is alive and well in this country. Many juggle careers and families while they study, and they come from diverse backgrounds as well: a majority are school teachers, while others are civil servants, private sector employees, members of the armed forces, senior citizens, physically disadvantaged individuals, people living in remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak, and a small number are prison inmates. That more than 120,000 of such individuals have enrolled at OUM since it started in 2001 is a compelling statistic to note. The flexibility and independence in teaching and learning is ODL's most significant advantage, and this will hopefully continue to encourage people, especially those within the labour force, to keep seeking learning opportunities through an institution like OUM. This is OUM's niche area, just as other institutions need to carve their own in order to contribute to lifelong learning.

Pushing ahead to 2020 and beyond

Vision 2020, the embodiment of the Malaysian aspiration of a fully developed, industrialised and self-sustaining nation, is fast approaching. We have but eight years to accomplish many of the ideals and goals that were first encapsulated in 1991. Specific to lifelong learning, the unveiling of the Blueprint is something that should be seen as a way to boost and re-energise this final sprint towards Vision 2020. Its successful implementation will hinge upon the commitment of all the relevant stakeholders, both public and private. We need to look inwards, to see where we stand, and outwards, to learn from others who have been able to reach higher. If, hopefully, lifelong learning can be truly embraced as a Malaysian culture, its worth will stretch further than just Vision 2020. It will determine if Malaysia will merely drift back, or is able to push forward, in an upstream river.

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