

# The school co-operative – a training ground for future entrepreneurs

**Hariffah Afifah Syed Abbas**

## Background

The First Malaysian Co-operative Congress in 1953 passed a resolution urging the government to set up co-operatives in schools to inculcate the co-operative model among school children. The project took off in 1968 with nine schools being selected for the pilot project. Since then, the number has increased significantly and confidence in the school co-operative movement has grown. The school co-op is recognised and accepted as a co-curriculum activity in Malaysia by the government, which sees it as an important and meaningful activity, especially for secondary school students. The government formalised its support for the national programme in the country's Education Act (1961) and National Education Policy. Members of the co-operatives are mainly students in the 12 to 17 age range, a particularly good age for young people to be involved in such activities, and a very valuable timeframe to introduce co-operative principles and values to the

youth. The government acknowledges that through the co-operative movement, young students can become responsible and independent, as well as provide them with the opportunity for leadership, and expose them to the world of business.

At St George's Girls' School (established nearly 130 years ago) the school co-operative has been active since 1970 and is now the pride of the school. Over the years, the co-operative has expanded into various business activities undertaken by its student and teachers. The success of the co-operative has gained recognition from ANGKASA (the central body for co-operative activities in Malaysia), as well as the Malaysian Co-operative Societies Commission, which has ranked the school's co-operative a 5 Star Co-op and awarded it the National Level Special Award For Co-operatives with a grant of RM10,000. Involvement in the school co-operative enables students to transfer their knowledge of commercial subjects and information and communication



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technology (ICT) into entrepreneurial skills. These skills will help students learn how to be entrepreneurs themselves, once they have completed their tertiary studies, as they need not confine themselves to the limited, conventional, job market.

## Experiential learning

In line with Malaysia's Education Development Master Plan, which aims to produce first-class human capital to enable the country to face the challenges and competitiveness of a globalised world, a holistic education system is envisaged whereby innovation and entrepreneurship in schools plays as important a role as academic achievements. The school co-operative contributes greatly to this, as what is learned in the classroom translates into good practice. Knowledge related to such subjects as Economics, Accounts, Commerce and ICT is aptly applied to the operations of the co-operative activities, a perfect training ground for student entrepreneurs. The diversified nature of the co-operative's business concerns gives the students a wide range of experience.

In St George's, membership of the co-operative is expected of all students, who become a member by subscribing to a minimum of ten shares at RM10. At present, we boast a membership of 1,556, with paid-up capital amounting to RM52,785.60.

## Retail

The pioneer among the co-operative activities, a shop, provides services and sells products to the school, teachers, students and parents. Among the items on sale are stationery, exercise books, accessories, second-hand revision books, novels and sportswear. In addition, other products such as perfume, jewellery, towels, toiletries and souvenirs are sold. The shop also provides services like laminating and binding and meets special orders from neighbouring schools and the general public.

The Co-op Shop is run solely by the students, with guidance from the teachers. It operates during break times throughout the school day, as well as after school. The task of running the shop is shared among a few students who receive an on-duty allowance for working there.

The Co-op Shop also encourages students to be creative and come up with new products that will be marketed by the co-op. This has received overwhelming response from the students who have over the years managed to come up with many interesting ideas. The products have also won awards at state and national level.

Georgian Glitz Pte Ltd is an offshoot of the school's co-operative. It advocates its members to transfer their knowledge of commerce-based subjects into developing entrepreneurship skills by starting a company and running the business. The company has linkages and networking with Penang Development Corporation (PDC). It is a win-win relationship as important knowledge and experience is shared in the activities organised. Shareholders of this company are given hands-on experience to sell products at the Kiosk, courtesy of PDC. Shareholders are also able to carry out business activities as they would in the real world. They are taught business strategies and responsibilities, and learn how to carry out product and service promotions and advertisements that befit the clientele's needs and demands.



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*External partners, like Relau Agriculture Department, have provided in-kind resources and technical support*

## Cyber Cafe

St George's Cyber Cafe, which was officially opened in January 2010 by the Director of Penang Education Department, is organised and run by sixth-form students. There are 20 computers available for students to go online and access the internet, for which there is a small fee. In addition, the cafe offers services such as photocopying, printing, laminating and binding. The cafe sells snacks like ice cream, crackers and drinks, as well as computer accessories.

The Cyber Cafe is open to students during school breaks, and after school from 2.40pm to 5.30pm. Students who use the cafe are usually those who stay behind for extracurricular activities or who are waiting for parents to pick them up.

## Cafeteria and other catering

The Cafeteria was officially opened in 2009 by the Deputy Minister of Education Malaysia, YB Dr Puad Zarkashi. It is managed by 40 students from Forms 1, 2 and 4. Business at the cafeteria is very encouraging, with support from the school, teachers, parents, students and visitors. In addition, suppliers of food are also mainly from among the teachers and parents.

This cafeteria also receives visits from local, national and international schools. The cafeteria provides wi-fi services, and is very popular among the students.

The school offers Living Skills as a subject to the lower secondary students, who get to study accounts and home economics, which they can put into practice by preparing and serving the food.



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*The co-op tries to instil the school's core values: integrity, compassion, respect and responsibility*

### Agriculture

Chilli Fertigation has been up and running since 15 August 2009. This was set up with the assistance of the Relau Agriculture Department, which provided technical support, fertilizers and chilli seedlings.

Many problems were encountered during the planting process: the fertilizer was very expensive, and facilities like a covered shed were lacking. Furthermore, chilli fertigation is a very costly process, and requires a lot of time and patience. However, with the determination and enthusiasm of the students and teachers, the project has been a success and is now moving on to its second cycle. The project is managed by Form 2 students, who not only learn about the technique of cultivating chillies, but also how to create and maintain a greener school environment.

### Tourism

The Tourism Society was formed in 2008, after being registered with the Tourism Ministry of Malaysia. The club has more than 100 members. Many of the students undergo training at external institutions, like Segi College, Sentral College and KDU University College, where they learn how to receive visitors and how to act as tour guides.

The society organises many activities throughout the year, and members participate in quizzes, exhibitions and 'speech' competitions. The main project over the last two years has been to act as tour guides to students participating in our St George's Girls' School International Students Conference.

In September 2010, a hospitality budget hotel known as Casa Georgian was introduced by the school co-operative. The objective of the project was to give our students the opportunity to explore the hospitality field. Casa Georgian, with its tagline 'Home Away From Home', is a project run completely by students under the direction of a teacher adviser.

The project started out with four rooms at the school hostel, which were renovated to a comfortable standard. Each room can accommodate ten guests at a time, and laundry services and coffee-making facilities are provided for guests.

Between January 2011 and August 2012, Casa Georgian not only welcomed local visitors but also visitors from other countries, namely Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and India.

In 2011, the project was used in the State and National Level Entrepreneurship Convention. In this competition, Casa Georgian won third place in both the Young Co-operator category and Teacher Adviser category.

The Hostel Shop caters sells snacks, biscuits, bread, drinks, chocolate and ice cream, as well as household products. During the fasting month, the Hostel Shop sells food such as kebabs for the students. It is managed by 21 students and a teacher adviser.

A fitness centre is the latest branch of the school co-operative, and is open to teachers and students. The fitness centre is equipped with treadmills, exercise bikes and other exercise machines. School athletes usually make use of the centre to train. Students are responsible for taking care of the fitness centre under the supervision of a teacher.

## Financial status and contributions to the community

The co-operative has performed extremely well over a period of seven years, and made a healthy profit of RM131,915.71 for the financial year ending 31 August 2011. This has led the board of directors to declare a 15 per cent dividend.

In the pursuit of doing business, the co-op, together with the school, tries to instil the school's four core values: Integrity, Compassion, Respect and Responsibility. Some of the project's key contributions to the school community include:

- Financial aid for students who have lost their parents
- Subsidised school fees for poor students
- Sponsoring of tickets for poor students to attend the school's production 'Fame Up'
- Grants and monetary aid for poor students
- Subsidies for trips made by members of clubs and societies
- Free stationery for students taking major public examinations
- Contributions to the school's events, like Sports Day, School Open Day and Awards of Excellence Day

For the community outside the school, the co-operative has carried out the following:

- Adopted a child with cerebral palsy from the Penang Spastics Association
- Donated money to the Buddhist Tzu-Chi Merits Society of Malaysia to be forwarded to the victims of the China earthquake and Myanmar cyclone

- Donated to orphanages
- Provided monetary aid to victims of boat disaster in Sarawak
- Donations for Palestinian children
- Donations to children of single parents

The existence of the school co-operative has given unlimited opportunities to its members to attend countless seminars, conventions, carnivals, competitions and entrepreneurship-related courses.

## Looking ahead

The school co-operative looks forward to achieving greater heights as we seek to expand our business concerns outside the school. Moving beyond the confines of the school environment into the real business world will help our students face real-life challenges in the true sense of the word.

St George's Girls' School has been very successful in teaching entrepreneurship skills to its students. In the time the School Co-operative has been running, we have seen our students blossom from timid 12-year-olds to mature, enterprising 17-year-olds. The school is confident that this project can serve as a model for other schools to replicate for the good of future generations.

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