



LIFELONG LEARNING AS THE CATALYST IN HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia's National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP): 2007-2020 with its emphasis on higher education excellence, lifelong learning is recognised as one of its seven strategic thrusts. In the ensuing National Higher Education Action Plan Phase 2: 2011-2015, lifelong learning is identified as one of its 23 Critical Agenda Projects (CAPs). Each CAP sets its direction, implements its plans, formulates its key performance indicators, measures and monitors its performance for benchmarking purposes. As for the Lifelong Learning CAP, a Blueprint for the Enculturation of Lifelong Learning in Malaysia: 2011-2020 was officially launched in November 2011. In the blueprint, the status of lifelong learning is elevated to be the Third Pillar of Malaysia's Human Capital Development System alongside the First Pillar (School System) and the Second Pillar (Tertiary System). The Blueprint focuses on upgrading the productive segment of the society, aged between 15 to 65 years. This is in line with the national aspiration to be a developed and high income nation in the year 2020. To achieve this vision, among others, there is an urgent need to transform our nation's workforce into knowledge workers. As the largest higher education lifelong learning provider of the country, Open University Malaysia (OUM) needs to play its role effectively in this national agenda. This paper will highlight the focus of the National Lifelong Learning Blueprint and the role of OUM in it.

In 1991, at the tabling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan, YAB Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, introduced "Wawasan 2020" or Vision 2020, where he envisioned that Malaysia will be a self-sufficient industrialized nation by the year 2020, encompasses all aspects of life, ranging from economic prosperity, social well-being, educational world class, political stability, as well as psychological balance. In his presentation, he said (Mahathir, 1991),

"Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally. We must be fully developed in terms of national unity and social cohesion, in terms of our economy, in terms of social justice, political stability, system of government, quality of life, social and spiritual values, national pride and confidence".

While globalisation has contributed to faster economic growth, it has also created several challenges such as imbalanced economic growth, inequality and potential social and political instability in many nations.

In recent years, Malaysia has fallen behind its competitors due to its slower growth after the financial crisis of 1997-98. Prior to the crisis, the average economic growth was 9.4 percent. Post-crisis growth plunged to 5.7 percent, causing Malaysia to deviate from its original growth trajectory (Figure 1.1). To bring the country back to its original growth path and enable it to attain a high income status, we urgently need a radical change in our approach to economic development (NEAC, 2010).

I. INTRODUCTION

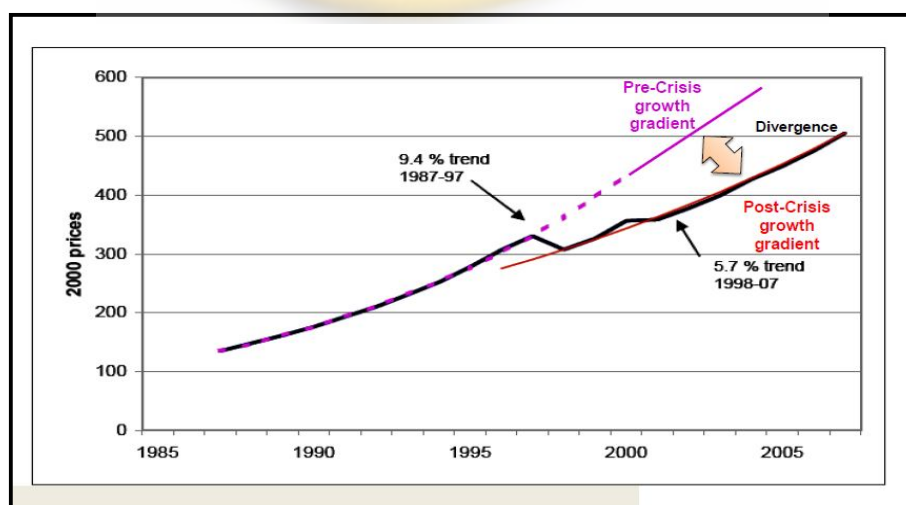


Figure 1
Malaysia's Growth Trajectory
Source: www.neac.gov.my



To achieve this aim, one of the prerequisites is the establishment of effective and efficient human capital development system. Both the public and private sectors must contribute towards this effort. In this regard, in 1997, the then Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) formulated the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP): 2007-2020 with its emphasis on higher education excellence. The plan identified "Enculturation of Lifelong Learning" as one of its seven strategic thrusts and emphasised on (NHESP: 2007-2020):

- Recognition of lifelong learning through the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF)
- Recognition of Prior Learning Experience
- Increased participation of lifelong learning by adults; and
- Alternative pathways and programme mobility.

Lifelong learning however, was given a special emphasis earlier under the country's Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP3) (2001-2010). Under the plan, lifelong learning was promoted and workers were encouraged to continuously upgrade their skills and knowledge in order to remain relevant in the environment of rapidly changing technology and work processes. Both the public and private sectors were encouraged to set up the necessary infrastructure to facilitate lifelong learning. Firms and industries were encouraged to provide incentives to their employees to relearn and continuously upgrade their skills. Towards this end, financial institutions were encouraged to provide low interest loans to those interested in upgrading their skills

The plan also required educational institutions to introduce flexible learning approaches in terms of duration of course, entry requirements and mode of teaching as well as ensure affordability. Community colleges and resource centres were set up to increase accessibility to acquire and disseminate knowledge.

In the National Higher Education Action Plan: 2011-2015, lifelong learning was included as one of the 23 Critical Agenda Projects (CAPs) of the then Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Each CAP, headed by Chairperson, sets its direction, implements its plans, formulates its key performance indicators, measures and monitors its performance for benchmarking purposes. The chairperson for CAP is YBhg Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Anuwar Ali, the President/Vice-Chancellor of Open University Malaysia. At the initiative of the Ministry, the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia: 2011-2020 was formulated in 2010 and officially launched by YAB Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in November 2011. This represents a significant milestone in Malaysia's lifelong learning agenda and the Blueprint is now at its implementation stage.

This paper will highlight the focus of the National Lifelong Learning Blueprint and the role of OUM in it.

II. THE NATIONAL LIFELONG BLUEPRINT

MOHE has rightfully placed lifelong learning agenda as one of its seven strategic thrust in the NHESP and noted that lifelong learning through distance learning, e-learning, workplace and part-time learning will become

an integral entity to support Malaysia's human capital development and the nation's knowledge and innovation-based economy (MOHE, 2007).

To realise the full potential of lifelong learning for Malaysia, the National Lifelong Learning Blueprint aims to address the following issues and challenges (Guan, et.al., 2011):

1. Absence of a full-fledged lifelong learning policy;
2. Lack of monitoring of lifelong learning programme at the national level;
3. Lack of awareness and participation in lifelong learning programmes;
4. Inadequate financial support for lifelong learners;
5. Inadequate mechanism and infrastructure for effective implementation of lifelong learning programmes;
6. Overlapping lifelong learning activities programmes; and
7. Recognition.

The Blueprint defines lifelong learning as "learning engaged by everyone of age 15 years and above except professional students, where professional students are those who are enrolled full-time in school, college or university with the aim of acquiring academic qualifications of skills". This definition is adopted to provide the much needed focus on upgrading and upskilling the education and skills level of working adults in line with the country's aspiration to be a high income economy by 2020. It employs four strategies as follows (MOHE, 2007).

1. Strengthening of the mechanism and initiatives of lifelong learning through the establishment of the National Lifelong Learning Committee to formulate policy and provide an enabling environment to move lifelong learning agenda for the country as a whole;
2. Providing awareness and promotional lifelong learning programmes to the general public through catchy jingles or tagline and enticing the general population via incentives and funding mechanism;
3. Ensuring sustainability of lifelong learning programmes via appropriate recognition and accreditation which include recognition of prior learning experience, quality assurance and establishment of credit bank for lifelong learning programmes; and
4. Providing strong support learning system to encourage individuals to participate lifelong learning programmes.

The strategic objectives, KPIs and targets as well as the operational definition of the Lifelong Learning CAPs were derived through numerous workshops, discussions and meetings attended by lifelong learning stakeholders institutions. The lifelong learning concepts and policy direction were deliberated intensively at these workshops in order to arrive at a common understanding and acceptance of lifelong learning to be implemented by these institutions.

At the level of implementation, the Blueprint provides a list of initiatives with their performance objectives, performance and accountability metrics (or KPIs), strategic targets, sponsoring organisations and budget allocations.

The Blueprint recommended that all lifelong learning initiatives are to be governed by the following principles (Guan, et.al., 2011):

1. Enculturation of lifelong learning is a national agenda and to be the “third pillar” of human capital development;
2. Maximum impact and complementarity;
3. Cost effectiveness;
4. Accountability;
5. Creativity and innovation;
6. Leveraging on technology; and
7. Benchmarking with international best practices.

By recognising that lifelong learning as the Third Pillar of the country's Human Capital Development System, the Malaysian government places it as an equally important agenda as the first two pillars of the system as given in Figure 2 below.

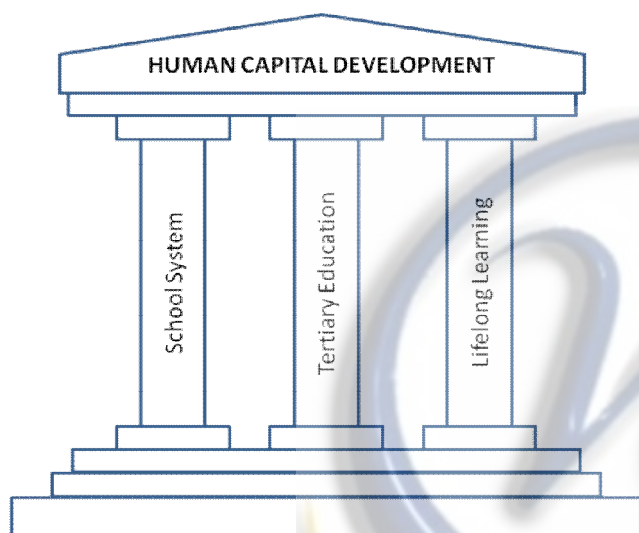


Figure 2
Lifelong Learning as the Third Pillar of Human Capital Development

Among the initiatives recommended by the Blueprint is the setting up of a National Lifelong Learning Committee (NLC) to provide the policy guidelines on lifelong learning at the national level. NLC is chaired by the Minister of Education and its members comprise of institutions and individuals who are lifelong learning stakeholders and experts, respectively. NLC is assisted by a Technical Committee that will oversee and monitor the implementation of the various lifelong learning initiatives and programmes. For the purpose of executing the action plans each of the lifelong learning strategies, another level of working committees is set up to focus on the following (Guan, et.al., 2011):

1. Coordinating and Strengthening Lifelong Learning Programmes;
2. Accreditation of Prior Learning Experience and lifelong learning Credit Bank System;
3. Lifelong Learning Database Development and Management;
4. Funding Mechanisms; and
5. Promotion and Awareness Campaigns and Promotions.

For ease of implementation and monitoring, all lifelong learning programmes are divided into 4 clusters, namely;

1. Academic programmes such as online certificate, diploma and degree programmes conducted on a part-time basis including online programmes;
2. Technical and vocational programmes such as the modular courses offered in Community Colleges;
3. Informal programmes that are aimed to increase the knowledge and skills of individuals in their daily life such as language, sewing, cooking classes, etc; and
4. In-service training programmes for officers and staff of the respective ministries as well as in the private sectors. Such in-service training are normally mandatory as part of the effort to raise the standards and quality of civil service and private sector employees.

III. LIFELONG LEARNING PROVIDERS

Lifelong learning initiatives should be supported by a synergistic collaboration between the public (Government) and the private (employers) sectors. The principal aim is to enhance the skills and knowledge level of the working population. Cooperation between various government agencies, government employees (through CUEPACS), industries (through FMM, MEF, Chambers of Commerce and Industry) and private sector employees (through MTUC and NGOs) are of paramount importance.

In Malaysia, there is a myriad of institutions involved in lifelong learning activities and programmes. To ensure that they are aligned to a common agenda, there needs to be a review of their existing vision, objectives and functions relating to lifelong learning. There several reasons for this review. First, it will allow for greater efficiency, newly focused direction and better management of internal resources including personnel, infoware and facilities. Second, it enables the sharing of expertise and facilities among these institutions in the delivery of quality and learner-centred education. Third, each institution should focus on its niche areas and provide excellent delivery of their programmes and services in those areas. Duplication of activities and programmes should be avoided as it will result in sub-optimum utilisation of resources and will incur a big loss to the nation. Under Ministry of Education, we have the following institutions, namely, community colleges, polytechnics, conventional public and private universities, open and distance learning (ODL) universities like OUM and other private colleges. The community colleges have been pronounced as the hub of lifelong learning and they offer programmes which are relevant to the needs of the local community, assist the poorest segments of society, the underprivileged, the disabled and senior citizens to enhance their communication and computer skills (MOHE, 2011).

There are many government agencies under several ministries conducting lifelong learning programmes. Examples are the Department of Skills Development (DSD) of Ministry of Human Resources, Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS) of Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, MARA and Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-based Industry (MOAAI). These agencies serve different target groups and provide programmes in tune



with their agencies' mission and objectives. For instance, KEMAS provides lifelong learning programmes for rural communities. One of the principal aims of MARA's lifelong programmes is to develop entrepreneurs among the local indigenous community. MOAAI provides skills training in agriculture-related fields (MOHE, 2011).

IV. OUM AS LIFELONG LEARNING HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDER

OUM was established in August 2000 and began taking in the first batch of 753 learners in August 2001. At the end of September 2013 semester, it has a cumulative intake of 133,665 with more than 5,000 international learners. It offers 51 academic programmes ranging from Diploma, Bachelor, Master and Doctoral and PhD programmes. It's 21 own learning centres are distributed in all the major cities of the country and employs between 3,000 to 4,000 part-time tutors in each semester. As at its recent Convocation in December 2013, it has produced a total of 53,177 graduates.

Housed under OUM are three other institutes and centres, namely the Institute of Professional Development (IPD), the Centre of Modern Languages (CML) and the School of Lifelong Learning (SoLL). IPD and SoLL offer more than 100 executive development programmes and thus far have graduated more than 10,000 learners between them. CML offers 30 programmes and has convoked more than 300 learners.

By far, OUM is the largest provider of lifelong learning higher education provider in Malaysia. It is the country's seventh private university and a consortium of the country's first 11 public universities. Its mission is to democratise education by widening access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by leveraging on technology, adopting flexible mode of learning, and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost. The main features that have contributed to the success of OUM as a lifelong learning institution are as follows:

1. Flexible entry

Flexible Entry is an alternative pathway for individuals to obtain a degree at OUM through less stringent entry requirements. It provides working adults the opportunity to leverage on prior learning and work experience to gain admission into OUM undergraduate or postgraduate levels programmes. To qualify for Flexible Entry, individuals must meet the basic entry requirements, and have the right competency and aptitude to meet the demands of being a university learner. OUM's Flexible Entry is recognised by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) under the Open Entry System introduced in 2006.

2. Accreditation of Prior Learning Experience (APEL)

Learners are now allowed to gain credits for certain courses based on their work experience and experiential learning gained through informal or non-formal learning through APEL. The learning is measured systematically against the specific outcomes of the course and assessed in terms of its authenticity, sufficiency, reliability and

validity, prior to the award of APEL credits. By obtaining such credits, learners can then accelerate completion of a university degree. Both Flexible Entry and APEL are managed by a special unit called the "Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning" (CAPL).

3. Learner-Centredness

Learner-centredness is at the core of all OUM activities. Two examples are cited to describe how this approach is translated into action. First, learner feedback are obtained in all its face-to-face and e-tutoring sessions. Second, a software called Electronic Customer Relationship Management (ECRM) System is used to tract enquiries, complaints, grouses and even compliments electronically. This enables the intuition to collect data for continuous improvement in its programmes and services.

4. E-Learning

Without doubt, e-learning is OUM's lifeblood. E-learning serves as one of the major components of its blended delivery modes and is delivered using its own and internally developed e-learning delivery platform called, "my virtual learning environment" (or myVLE).

A learning platform is necessary but not sufficient for effective learning. More importantly, is the e-content. In addition to the basic content, OUM provides an array of e-learning resources and support materials. These include learning objects, PDF documents, Microsoft Office attachments and digital library. Additional applications include Web-based learning materials, i-radio, face book, twitter, OUM Apps, YouTube, Mathematics Resource Centre (MRC), English Resource Centre (e-Gate), Educational Portal for Internet Courses (EPIC) and METEOR Live.

5. Flexible learning

Adult learners face a greater challenge of fitting in their learning into their very busy schedule and they prefer flexible learning where they can adjust their learning schedule to suit their daily lives. In addition, adult learners are more diverse, even in terms of learning styles. In this regard, OUM adopts the blended mode of learning as well as fully online learning. The blended mode comprises of 3 components, the self-managed learning, face-2-face and e-learning. Learners can choose the mode that suits their learning styles.

OUM is flexible in terms of the duration of study as provided for by MQA. It allows learners to extend their duration of study to twice the minimum requirements, i.e. Diploma, up to 6 years, Bachelor (8 years), Master (4 years) and PhD (8 years).

It also provides flexibility in terms of the location of their learning centres, that is, learners, both local and international can attend tutorials and take examinations at the LCs of their choice.

Finally, OUM provides for different assessment methods for different courses depending on the nature of the courses.

6. Industry-Relevant Programmes

Working adults need study programmes that can enhance their career development. That means they must be industry-relevant. To ensure that its programmes meet the needs of learners, OUM conducts market needs analysis. To provide inputs to our curriculum development,



the members of its Boards of Studies comprise of prominent personalities from the industry. The subject matter experts (SMEs) and a proportion of its teaching staff are industry practitioners. For quality assurance, OUM uses the time-tested industrial model of mass production in its teaching and learning approach whereby the teaching and learning process involves different set of people at different stages of production. For example, module writers are different from the tutors and the latter are different from the examiners. This is in contrast with the traditional "cottage industry" style of production typically practised in conventional universities where the single lecturer performs at every stage of preparation, delivery and assessment.

7. Institutional Research

As in other universities, OUM staff are encouraged to conduct research. However, the emphasis is on institutional research. Research in the area of teaching and learning is heavily emphasised. Learner retention is another very important area to an ODL institution like OUM and staff are encouraged to carry out research in this area. Currently, we have a tripartite collaboration in retention research involving Sukhothai Thamathirat Open University (STOU) in Thailand, University of Philippines Open University (UPOU) and Open University Malaysia (OUM).

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning has rightfully earned its place in Malaysia's human capital development (HCD) system when it was accorded the Third Pillar of HCD alongside with those of the School and Tertiary Education systems. The roadmap for the enculturation of lifelong learning has been formulated and is now at the implementation stage. Malaysia is very placed indeed to move forward in its socio-economic development from the standpoint of lifelong learning.

However, there are several challenges that need to be overcome. First, offering lifelong learning programmes requires careful planning in terms of costs, benefits and resource allocations. Second, translating the National Lifelong Learning Agenda into reality requires selective strategies and effective collaboration amongst providers. Third, lifelong learning programmes must be closely monitored in order to ensure that it enhances Malaysia's human capital development. Fourth, the country's lifelong learning agenda must promote a culture of continuous urge to learn and relearn. Fifth, there must be capacity building at the all levels of society or in other words, there must be equity and inclusivity. Sixth, the enculturation of lifelong learning for Malaysia also must enhance employability by boosting employee learning and upgrading. And last but not least, it has to leverage on ICT for it to be flexible and pervasive. And to be affordable, the government will have to further its ICT infrastructure to make it more accessible to all strata of the society (Ali, 2013).

As the premier ODL institution in the country, OUM is very well placed as a lifelong learning higher education provider and it has played its role well. Using the ODL mode and the blended delivery system as well as leveraging on technology, OUM has contributed

significantly to lifelong learning and human capital development of the country.

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