

Promoting Lifelong Learning: The Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

The new millennium has witnessed serious efforts taken by the Malaysian government to promote lifelong learning in the country. Enculturation of lifelong learning was incorporated as a strategic thrust in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan in 2007. In the past two decades, the government has put in place systems and policies to liberalize the Malaysian education system, especially in distance online learning, skill education and to recognize prior experiential learning. However, the result has been evidently mixed. This study introduces and examines the efforts taken so far and the challenges faced.

Key words: Lifelong learning, online and continuing education

Introduction

At the turn of the century, the Malaysian government began to realize the need to accelerate the transformation of the Malaysian economy if Vision 2020 is to be achieved. This vision was launched in 1991 by the then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, to transform Malaysia into a developed nation by the year 2020. This transformation would involve the transition from a production-based into a knowledge-based economy (K-economy).

A major feature of the K-economy is the deepening reliance on knowledge-based activities which will involve the rapid diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT), more intense internationalization of business, and the shift of business and employment away from conventional moods of production (Tan *et al.*, 2006: 142). The key to the success of a K-economy is obviously a knowledgeable workforce that is also adept to continuously absorbing new knowledge. This also accords well with Vision 2020's attempt to nurture lifelong learning in a scientific and progressive society.

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The liberalization and internationalization of the Malaysian education system had its beginning in 1996 when the Private Higher Education Act was passed in Parliament to chart a course of education, especially at the tertiary level, that would be more flexible, accessible and dynamic than what was hitherto available. Consequently, the idea of a lifelong learning society was built into the process. At the turn of the new millennium, support for the idea of lifelong learning gathered pace and led the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the then second biggest component party in the coalition government, to incorporate it into nine-point party manifesto in 2004. Malaysia also endorses the rationale of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for promoting lifelong learning (Mansor and Latifah, 2010: 243) which includes the following arguments:

- The rapid pace of globalization and technological change;
- The changing nature of work and the employment market; and
- The gaping disparities in gaining access to learning opportunities between the knowledge-haves and knowledge-have-nots.

In 2007, enculturation of lifelong learning was incorporated as a strategic thrust in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP). The objectives of the NHESP are to ensure that lifelong learning becomes a way of life for Malaysians in order to equip our citizens with lifelong knowledge and skills, and to make lifelong learning the catalyst for establishing a learning community in every organization (Mansor and Latifah, 2010: 243).

The NHESP stipulates the following strategies to promote lifelong learning in Malaysia:

1. Upgrade the mechanism and infrastructure to facilitate lifelong learning as a means of developing diverse kinds of knowledge and skills in line with individual interest and needs to enrich the quality of life;
2. Enhance public awareness and involvement in lifelong learning so that individuals can develop their potential and reap the benefits of lifelong learning in terms of productivity, competitiveness and marketability;
3. Ensure the continuity and appreciation of lifelong learning; and
4. Provide adequate financial support to inculcate lifelong learning as a way of life (Mansor and Latifah, 2010: 243-244).

The European Union defines lifelong learning as “all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence” (Buntat *et al.*, 2013: 1541). The aim of lifelong learning is to improve one’s employability and life. The Malaysian blueprint looks upon lifelong learning as “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments” (MOHE, 2011: 5).

The unveiling of the *Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020)* in November 2011 was another significant milestone in Malaysian education. This

Blueprint emphasizes forms of lifelong learning beyond basic and formal education, and often involving professional continuing development and work-based learning (Mansor, 2014: 371). Its influence on future trends in the sphere of tertiary education in Malaysia is therefore obvious.

Lifelong learning gives due emphasis to the potential to learn during a person's lifetime, and the effort to facilitate and encourage that learning as well as to recognize the achievement when learning is achieved. It is to provide a "second chance" for all to acquire higher education and to update their knowledge and skills. The targeted group is the working population between 15 and 63 years old with the attendant focus on economic growth and development. The number of lifelong learners from 2005 to 2020 was estimated to be 22.6 million, or 66 per cent of the total population of Malaysia (MOHE, 2011: 6).

Lifelong learning may be formal, non-formal or informal (Buntat *et al.*, 2013: 1542). Formal learning takes place in educational institutions and leading to some form of accreditation or qualification. Non-formal learning occurs outside of a formal education setting where the aim of learning may not necessarily result in a particular qualification, including persons who engage in activities that impart new skills or knowledge in areas that are relevant to their work or personal development. Informal learning consists generally of unstructured learning activities to enable individuals to meet their curiosity for knowing about certain things. Inherent in these forms of learning is the possibility of non-formal and informal learning to cross over to formal learning. This has been made possible by the Malaysian government which, over the years, has provided for such crossings to encourage Malaysians to acquire tertiary qualifications.

The Malaysian public has responded positively to the idea of lifelong learning. Educational institutions, the public, employers, and even political parties have organized lifelong learning activities and classes. MCA drafted lifelong learning into its political manifesto as early as 2004 in an attempt to garner popular support and set up the MCA Lifelong Learning Centre the following year. Classes and activities were organized in its local branches and mobilized its party machinery, including affiliated university and colleges to promote lifelong learning programmes, targeting especially fresh school leavers. This study will examine the efforts by the Malaysian government and other parties in achieving the above objectives and the challenges that are faced.

Upgrading of Mechanism and Infrastructure

Formal Lifelong Learning – E-Learning

Besides creating awareness, the government has, over the years, been investing in building infrastructures and systems to facilitate lifelong learning in Malaysia with a major focus on the promoting of e-learning. The intention was to open up opportunities to the adult population to acquire qualifications that they had missed earlier in life or to upgrade themselves while working (Chai and Poh, 2009: 238). Furthermore, e-learning was a more cost effective alternative compared to building more universities (Chai and Poh, 2009: 238).

The situation in 2004 was that Malaysia was moderately prepared for e-learning in terms of technical and cultural readiness but not so from the perspective of the overall environmental setting and financial support (Chai and Poh, 2009: 239). While the government is determined to develop e-learning, the reality seems less optimistic.

In the 1990s, two government-linked private universities were established to offer programmes in either the blended learning mode or the fully online mode (actual face-to-face delivery was still required in regional centres around the country). The oldest online university, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNIRAZAK), was established in late 1997 as one of the first private universities in the country and officially launched the following year by the then Minister of Education. On 1 March 2007, Tun Abdul Razak Education Foundation (Yayasan PINTAR) acquired Universiti Tun Abdul Razak Sdn. Bhd. which owned Universiti Tun Abdul Razak from KUB Malaysia Berhad (Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, 2016).

To date, five online universities are operating in Malaysia. They are:

- Tun Abdul Razak University (established in 1997). Initially owned by Universiti Tun Abdul Razak Sdn. Bhd.
- UNITAR International University (established in 1997). UNITAR is owned by UNITAR Capital Sdn. Bhd.
- Open University Malaysia (OUM; established in 2001) owned by the Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations (METEOR) Sdn. Bhd., a consortium of 11 Malaysian public universities.
- Wawasan Open University (WOU; established in 2007) owned by Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia.
- Asia E University (AeU; established in 2008 under the Asia Co-operation Dialogue).

Several other universities have been granted approvals to offer online programmes ranging from diploma to doctorate levels in various disciplines. Some have achieved satisfactory levels of success, with OUM in the forefront with an enrolment of more than 100,000 students (Open University Malaysia, not dated). However, under Malaysian regulations, these universities are not genuine online universities as they set up regional centres to assist student learning and require students to sit for examinations. Access to learning in these institutions is not totally without restriction as students rely on the limited facilities at regional centres in selected urban areas.

Despite the good intention of the government, e-learning in Malaysia is still confronted by numerous challenges in how to turn it into an adopted norm of learning. One of the major challenges is the prevalence of digital space and Internet facilities. In 2012, 70 per cent of Malaysians were non-users of the Internet, but the situation has since improved fairly substantially. In 2017 about a quarter of Malaysians were still non-users of the Internet, largely because they had no access to network connection or simply were able to afford it (Mansor *et al.*, 2015: 3; MCMC, 2017: 9). Malaysia's 4G coverage has reached a 75 per cent penetration rate, but its average speed is only 14.83 Mbps (*The Sun*, 23 February 2018). The imbalance in

the ratio of urban to rural Internet of about three to one also poses a challenge to bring e-learning to the countryside (Mansor *et al.*, 2015: 4).

Malaysian Grid for Learning

Another programme in support of the lifelong learning agenda in Malaysia is the Malaysian Grid for Learning (MyGfL). This is an official e-learning portal operating under the Ministry of Education (MoE) which provides relevant technologies and solutions to promote e-learning. MyGfL hosts a depository of learning contents that is available on the Internet since September 2004 (<http://www.mygfl.net.my>). In April 2005, a six-month pilot programme was launched for the benefit of the rural community focusing on skills-based learning such as basic information and communication technology, elementary English and entrepreneurship. Other pilot programmes have also been introduced for deaf children and their families, focusing on storytelling and sign-language instruction (Salam and Mansur, 2006: 9). Many schools and MoE agencies have made use of the portal as a learning platform for students and staff. It is noted that this programme has limited impact beyond the educational sector.

Malaysian Massive Open Online Courses

The government also experimented with open online courses in 2013 before launching the Malaysian Open Online Courses (MOOC) formally two years later (Mansor *et al.*, 2015: 1). It serves as a learning platform for the benefit of public university students and members of the public. Courses are generally free while a small fee is charged for certification.

MOOC is an innovative attempt for the diffusion of knowledge through online learning via video, PDF, powerpoint slides, discussion forums, quizzes and related assignments. It is a mode of delivery that goes beyond transforming traditional teaching and learning approaches. Its many advantages include the ability to make available quality education to anyone who seeks it; to promote the host institution's image and brand; to create opportunities for collaborative partnership with other institutions; and to stimulate research and development in online education (Mansor *et al.*, 2015: 1).

MOOC has since become a popular mode of learning among the young. By 2017, some 450 MOOC modules have been made available by public and private universities, polytechnics and community colleges and have been accessed by some 600,000 students in 170 countries (NST, 26 September 2017). MoE has set a target of 30 per cent of all courses in public universities to be delivered via MOOC by 2020 (Mansor *et al.*, 2015: 6). While the impact of MOOC has yet to be fully assessed, it is almost certain to become an integral part of the development of Malaysian tertiary education.

Centre for Continuing Education

Besides the promotion of e-learning, universities and colleges are urged to set up centres for continuing education to cater to the needs of adult learners by offering executive and short

training programmes. Executive diploma programmes had much appeal to school leavers with a minimum of three credits in their Malaysian Education Certificate (SPM) or O-level qualifications and with three years of working experience in areas related to their intended course of study. They may also qualify for credit exemptions for certain modules. With the abolition of exemptions in 2016, executive diploma programmes have lost its entry advantage over normal diploma programmes. This has caused significant declines in student enrolment to such an extent that some institutions have abandoned their executive programmes altogether. However, working adults may still apply for entry to the executive programmes or for credit exemption by taking advantage of the provisions laid out in the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) programme.

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

APEL may take the form of APEL(A) or APEL(C). APEL(A) allows for knowledge obtained through formal education and working experience to be assessed. Officially, it is devised as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation and assessment of prior experiential learning to determine the extent to which an individual has achieved the desired learning outcomes, for access to a programme of study and/or award of credits. It allows working adults who lack formal academic qualifications to pursue courses of studies in higher education institutions. OUM's website clarifies that APEL(A) assessment consists of an aptitude test in the national language, English, Mathematics and General Knowledge/ Critical Thinking, and a portfolio requirement for diploma and bachelor degree candidates. At the Master's level, the candidate is subjected to an interview.

APEL provides an avenue for academic advancement by taking into consideration a person's work experience and non-formal training received in the past and the score in a competency test. A person may seek entry to institutions of higher learning for the following levels of qualification as specified by the Malaysian Qualification Framework:

1. Level 3 (Certificate);
2. Level 4 (Diploma);
3. Level 6 (Bachelor's Degree); and
4. Level 7 (Master's Degree).

APEL(C) is an assessment of prior learning (informal and non-formal) of a working adult that is relevant and specific to the learning outcomes of a course within a programme for the purpose of credit exemption. It is the learning and not the experience of the learners that is being assessed. The assessment is on the capability of the person to apply the learning acquired through working experience in achieving the course learning outcomes (MQA Website). Currently, only OUM, WOU, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and INTI International University have been approved to conduct APEL(C) assessment.

The APEL(C) assessment will subject the candidate to examination by a panel of subject matter experts through a review of his/her resume, skills, knowledge and competencies that

are relevant to the programme of study as well as to sit for a test to judge the relevance of the candidate's learning.

The APEL assessment is a means to “formalize” informal and non-formal learning and to ensure quality and uniformity. Yet the assessment has not gained general acceptance among potential students. It is seen to lack flexibility as candidates have to fulfil certain conditions to gain permission to undergo the assessment. Although the assessment itself is relatively straight forward, those in senior positions see it as an embarrassment for having to undergo the process at all and consider it a deterrent to their wish to pursue a higher degree.

Community Colleges and Other Training Centres

The government has made considerable efforts to promote skills education in Malaysia. The dropout rate in schools, hitherto not subjected to study and overlooked, is fairly considerable. A study in 1997 indicated that a fifth of Chinese students dropped out of school before completing secondary education (See, 2007). Considerable numbers of students either fail the SPM examination or pass without the minimum number of credits to proceed to college education. The provision of skills education has thus become an urgent necessity to improve the prospects of these under-achievers.

Community colleges were first set up in 2000 with programmes to meet the needs for skills education. Numbering 91 in total, these colleges are widely dispersed throughout the country to offer a range of Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) programmes at the certificate and diploma levels relating to such disciplines as accounting, architecture, construction, engineering, drafting, entrepreneurship, hospitality, personal services, multimedia, visual arts, etc.

Other than community colleges, various training centres offer similar programmes under the aegis of the Ministries of Human Resources, Youth and Sport, Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development, Agriculture and Agro-based Industry, Health as well as the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). All programmes are taught in the national language and attract Bumiputera students much more than those from other ethnic communities. Also, the SPM entry requirement shuts out all school dropouts who do not possess this qualification. For a brief period in the mid-2000s, the MCA had attempted to encourage Chinese students to attend these institutions but to no avail.

At about the same time, skills training programmes leading to the Malaysian Skill Certificate from levels 1 to 5, City and Guilds and other certifications were franchised to some 500 private institutions throughout the country (TVET, 2016). At some advanced levels of qualification, their training could be counted as entry requirements into university level programmes. Despite being popular among many students, a major constraint is the availability of loans to relieve the financial pressure especially on the middle- to lower-income groups.

Training Provided by Employers

Training programmes provided by employers constitutes a major form of non-formal learning in Malaysia. These programmes may range from acquiring simple skills to advanced knowledge in specific fields. Training is commonly provided to improve skills and knowledge in sales and marketing, finance-related and regulatory issues. In a move to encourage employers to invest in staff training, it is mandatory that private companies contribute an equivalent of 1 per cent of their total monthly salary payout to the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF). This fund, set up in 1993, is managed by the Human Resources Development Council, through the Pembangunan Sumber Manusia Bhd. Act 2001 (Act 2001). Its mandate is to build up a body of skilled workers comprising 35 per cent of the total workforce to help attain the country's vision of becoming a high-income economy (<http://www.hrdf.com.my/wps/portal/PSMB/MainEN/Corporate-Profile/About-HRDF>). Besides training programmes *per se*, the HRDF also supports apprenticeship schemes, purchases of computing learning materials, equipment, and relevant items. The objective is to yield direct benefits to companies by upgrading their business operations and management.

In 2016, HRDF approved RM568.77 million in staff training programmes by making available a total of 895,610 training places (HRDF, 2016: 48). The bulk of the approved funding for training was heavily biased towards companies operating in large urban centres to the extent of 63, 14 and 9 per cent in the Kuala Lumpur-Selangor, Northern and Johor regions respectively (HRDF, 2016: 52).

MCA Lifelong Learning Campaign

Lifelong learning campaign was promoted by MCA, a political party, probably also as a way of securing political mileage. Under its Community Education Development Bureau, it conducted various activities and programmes for the benefit of the elderly community and selected groups such as taxi drivers. The programmes offered were meant to impart basic knowledge in Mandarin, English, computer skills, and health. It presented briefings and organized activities in community centres and shopping malls to broaden acceptance of its programmes (Rosmah *et al.*, 2010). MCA founded a Lifelong Learning Centre in 2008 and, together with branches scattered throughout the country, organized some 560 types of activities in 2009 to 2010 for the benefit of some 52,000 participants. At the same time the MCA-affiliated Tunku Abdul Rahman's Centre for Extended Education and Tunku Abdul Rahman College's Centre for Continuing and Professional Education were equally active in conducting 2,100 short programmes to more than 101,000 participants (Quek, 2010).

However, the flux in the party leadership hierarchy between 2008 and 2010 following poor performances in the national elections possibly sapped initial enthusiasm in the promotion of lifelong learning by MCA. The Lifelong Learning Centre soon ceased all operations as

the party fell into a state of uncertainty as it struggled for political survival. While the lifelong learning campaign of MCA had failed to yield positive political reward, the centres for extended education in both its affiliated educational institutions have nevertheless remained intact.

Financial Support

Adequate funding is at the core of sustaining lifelong learning and other academic or skills training programmes. On the academic front, efforts to boost the number of post-graduates and young scientists take the form of scholarships to potential students through the MyBrain15 and MyBrainsc schemes created under the Tenth Malaysia Plan, and made available to young Malaysians who have been accepted to pursue graduate studies or under-graduate programmes in the pure sciences. The MyBrain15 programme is to raise the number of Malaysian Ph. D. holders to 60,000 by 2023 while the MyBrainsc focuses on boosting the number of young scientists. In 2016, the number of Ph. D. holders in Malaysia was estimated at 23,000. The MyBrain15 programme has since enabled 8,100 Malaysians to pursue their post-graduate degrees supported by a total funding of RM1.769 billion (Fong, 2016).

At the skills education level, the Skills Development Fund Corporation (SDFC) was created in 2000 as a statutory body under the Ministry of Human Resources to manage a fund to provide assistance to students to acquire the Malaysian Skills Certificate, Malaysian Skills Diploma and Advanced Skills Diploma at public or private skills training centres that have been accredited by SDFC. Numerous private training institutions were set up to take advantage of the demand for skills training in automobile maintenance, hair styling, beauty treatment, culinary arts and many other vocational programmes. A serious problem that has emerged to interfere with the scheme is the exhaustion of funds resulting from the tardy repayment of loans advanced by the Corporation. SDFC is now more cautious and stricter in approving loans and this has added to the difficulties of many institutions in student recruitment.

Conclusion

The promotion of lifelong learning by Malaysia has met with mixed results and various challenges. Response to official efforts in fostering lifelong learning depends considerably on flexible entry requirements into formal learning programmes. MoE is often stricken by fickle-mindedness as there is an old school of thought which equates flexible entry with low quality. This problem has been partially addressed by the introduction of the APEL system but its full potential has yet to be exploited by the majority of higher education providers. In the case of online learning, the requirements for face-to-face meetings and conventional modes of examination have limited their impact and effect.

The APEL system is still in its development stage and needs to be fine-tuned to indicate clearly how prior learning may be blended with existing standard qualification requirements. Public transportation and Internet speed and connectivity have to be constantly upgraded in

order to support attempts to reach out to a wider circle of expectant online learners. Again, educational opportunities are skewed in favour of urban centres at the expense of vast swathes of rural areas. How to maintain an equitable balance is a major challenge to policy-makers.

Lifelong learning is an emerging trend in education that is gaining acceptance and popularity by education providers and individuals. It is the continuation of the learning process after the period of learning in a formal setting. To the government, the role of lifelong learning is to improve the overall quality of education and skills of the people and thence for enhancing workforce productivity and creativity. Among graduates and professionals, lifelong learning is a means to keep abreast of new developments in their areas of specializations, while among non-graduates, it offers an avenue for academic or vocational self-advancement. Other than the environment of formal educational setting, lifelong learning is an effective way for all to take advantage of the latest advancements in the entire spectrum of knowledge in the humanities, sciences, technologies and many others. It is also an effective channel through which learning opportunities made available by the latest modes of instruction such as e-learning and online instruction, MOOC programmes and others may be properly exploited. In short, it is by taking full advantage of lifelong learning that one may constantly upgrade one's knowledge and skills to keep up with the explosion of knowledge in the globalized world.

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