

ENCOURAGING LIFELONG LEARNING: THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

Mansor Fadzil

mansor@oum.edu.my

Open University Malaysia

Abstract

The unveiling of the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020) in November 2011 demonstrated Malaysia's commitment to inculcate lifelong learning as an important component in the nation's education agenda. Three years on, the implementation of the Blueprint is still an ongoing process that would benefit from greater participation from all Malaysians. At this juncture, encouraging lifelong learning – through a comprehensive set of strategies – will be crucial in order to ensure the success and long-term impact of the Blueprint. This will require participation and contribution from all education stakeholders, especially the Government, higher education institutions and various training providers. For Malaysia to achieve a developed nation status by 2020, the role of education is an undeniable imperative, especially so at the tertiary and post-tertiary levels where continued learning is becoming an increasingly important element to ensure a knowledgeable and skilful workforce and consequently, a more robust and competitive economy. Thus, encouraging lifelong learning must be acknowledged as an important step in achieving Malaysia's national aspirations. This paper will describe several crucial strategies that can contribute to this national initiative. These strategies will take into account the roles, responsibilities, capacities and potential of different education stakeholders. All-inclusive participation from all Malaysians can certainly bring many positive outcomes for lifelong learning and ultimately, for the nation's continued growth and development.

Introduction

Malaysia's aspiration to become a fully developed nation by 2020 is a decades-long initiative introduced more than twenty years ago by then incumbent Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad, at the tabling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. This aspiration was given the enduring moniker 'Wawasan 2020' and has been a fundamental background element in all of Malaysia's national plans and strategies since. 'Wawasan 2020' calls for a self-sufficient and industrialised Malaysia by 2020; where all aspects of life in Malaysia can rival those of other developed nations.

Now just six years left to 2020, Malaysia is at a crucial point in our development. In this final sprint towards what should be the greatest modern achievement in our country, our ability to indeed demonstrate the characteristics of a fully developed nation is still contentious. There is still much that the entire nation must achieve in order to realise this Malaysian dream.

The nine strategic challenges outlined under 'Wawasan 2020' (see Wikipedia, n.d.) focus on several critical areas, including democracy, moral and ethics, tolerance, scientific development, economic growth and societal development. The role of education in finding the solutions relevant to each of these strategic challenges is arguably the most important, as it is only through educated citizens that the necessary actions can be taken to achieve larger goals. Education at the tertiary and post-tertiary levels is particularly important, as continued learning beyond basic formal education is universally acknowledged as an important element to ensure a knowledgeable and skilful workforce capable of contributing to a robust and competitive economy.

In the 1990s, many significant developments in tertiary education took place, including the enactment of the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996 – which paved the way for the establishment of private higher education institutions; corporatisation of public universities; enactment of the National Accreditation Board Act 1996 – which saw the establishment of Malaysia's accreditation and qualifications body (now known as Malaysian Qualifications Agency, MQA); and massification as a means to increase tertiary education participation, especially in public institutions (see Lee, 2005).

Following suit of the restructuring in the 1990s, the unveiling of the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020) by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, in November 2011, is another significant milestone in Malaysian education. The Blueprint can perhaps be described as especially influential in the sphere of post-tertiary education, as many forms of lifelong learning are emphasised as learning beyond basic and formal education, often involving professional continuing development and work-based learning.

This calls for new roles, responsibilities and actions for the Malaysian Government, higher education institutions, private training providers, employers and the Malaysian society as well. If educating the Malaysian people is an agenda geared towards national progress, then lifelong learning needs to be given serious consideration by all education stakeholders. The Malaysian people too need to be more aware of lifelong learning and what its potential outcomes may be for the country. This is integral not only to the success and long-term impact of the Blueprint, but to the ultimate national goals as well.

This paper will focus on several recommended strategies that can encourage lifelong learning. These strategies will take into account the different roles, responsibilities, capacities and potential of all education stakeholders.

Strategies to Encourage Lifelong Learning

The current actual status of lifelong learning in Malaysia is difficult to pinpoint, although any effort to encourage better understanding, awareness and participation across all levels of society will certainly benefit the lifelong learning agenda in this country. The numbers of school and university enrolments nationwide continue to witness positive developments, signifying a steady general growth in education. However, other forms of learning are more complex to measure, as they take place outside the formal education system. One of the most important forms often mentioned in the sphere of lifelong learning is the continued learning of the labour force.

At the end of 2013, the Malaysian labour force was made up of about 13.2 million individuals, representing 44.4% of the Malaysian population (Economic Planning Unit, 2013). More than two-thirds of these individuals – representing close to 8.8 million Malaysians – are defined as economically active. As such, their effective contribution to the economy holds considerable impact to national development. Encouraging these individuals to take part in lifelong learning initiatives is an important step in ensuring that from an economic standpoint, the nation can continue to benefit from their knowledge and skills.

Thus, this paper will focus on lifelong learning from the perspective of tertiary and post-tertiary levels of study with specific attention to the educational needs of working adults and economically active Malaysians.

The following section will discuss the relevant strategies that can hopefully contribute to the nation's lifelong learning cause.

Establish a National Structure for Lifelong Learning

Higher education institutions, post-secondary institutions such as polytechnics, community colleges, industrial and skills training institutes as well as professional training outfits are in the business of offering programmes at various study levels, from formal degrees to professional certificates. Many of these programmes serve a purpose in the national agenda of human capital development – formal qualifications are a major element in professional continuing education for working adults; while non-formal and informal courses present an opportunity for people to pick up new skills and knowledge useful in many areas of life.

While these initiatives and programmes demonstrate the general concern for competence development and education in the country, they need to be properly organised and coordinated if they are to make a more tangible impact on the lifelong learning agenda.

A lifelong learning structure, implemented nationwide, monitored and managed by a relevant Government body potentially under the purview of Ministry of Education (MOE), will be able to consolidate and reorganise all relevant courses and programmes. This may also prompt the establishment of designated lifelong learning providers in Malaysia, rather than the offering of programmes through numerous providers that should instead

focus on specific niche areas, e.g. research universities and technical and vocational training institutions. Other relevant agencies apart from MOE, for example Ministry of Human Resources, Ministry of Rural and Regional Development and *Majlis Amanah Rakyat* need to take part in the policy making process of this structure as well as in implementing the various initiatives proposed in the Blueprint.

All higher education institutions, whether public or private, as well as polytechnics, community colleges and various training providers must also play a role in the establishment of this national structure. These institutions need to conform to designated niche areas to avoid overlaps and to streamline the courses categorised as lifelong learning in Malaysia.

Establish a Designated Agency to Oversee Lifelong Learning

As part of a systematic national lifelong learning structure, Malaysia will benefit from a designated governing body that can closely monitor all lifelong learning targets and initiatives in the country. Most importantly, a single authoritative body can be expected to better track all deliverables and expected results. This agency can be established as a department under the purview of MOE, or even as a separate ministry. Doing so would demonstrate how seriously the Government perceives lifelong learning and would help to secure the confidence of the people with regards to approved providers and programmes related to this cause.

Allocate Funds for Lifelong Learning

Provision of funds is an important factor to ensure success of the lifelong learning agenda. The relevant institutions require financial assistance to ensure that infra- and infostructures, manpower, expertise and curricula required for running lifelong learning programmes can be sufficiently developed. The Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF) and Skills Development Fund (SDF) can provide financial assistance to Malaysians who want to take up such programmes. Similarly, the HRDF and SDF can continue to provide incentives to employers that encourage their employees to take up courses and programmes at approved institutions.

Cultivate a Lifelong Learning Culture

Making lifelong learning a culture amongst Malaysians must start with building awareness. Public and private organisations, including the Government and higher education institutions, can work together to organise promotional activities for lifelong learning, such as through roadshows and campaigns. Many initiatives have been proposed in the Blueprint, although at this juncture it is crucial to follow through with actions and results. While the onus is on the Government to spearhead these strategies at the national level, education stakeholders need to actively contribute and participate as well.

In a professional setting, employers can promote lifelong learning by creating a working environment that supports ongoing education and training, as well as rewards employees for learning and innovation (Freifeld, 2011). There are many relevant strategies that can be employed in any organisation, e.g. create a system for leadership and mentoring, and empowering employees to share ideas and deliver results in their immediate work requirements. However, this must involve a conscious effort by all employers, thus indicating that lifelong learning must be a backbone of organisational culture.

Leverage on Appropriate Technologies

A crucial characteristic in the universal concept of lifelong learning is that learning can take place outside the formal context of classrooms and libraries. The use of technologies is an example of the limitless possibilities involved in learning; evident in open and distance learning (ODL) approaches that utilise technology-based innovations such as e-learning and mobile learning. Similar approaches can be undertaken for lifelong learning, whether in course or programme delivery or for publicity purposes.

The use of mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, as well as online social networking platforms (e.g. Facebook), video-sharing websites (e.g. YouTube), and learning management systems have become popular in recent years. Malaysians can also look forward to extensive developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) that have been budgeted for 2015 to 2017, including construction of telecommunications towers and laying of undersea cables to boost nationwide connectivity and coverage, as well as expansion of high-speed broadband in urban locations (Kuncinas, 2014).

Worldwide, the use of technology for lifelong learning has been demonstrated in recent innovations like open educational resources (OER) and massive open online courses (MOOCs). Both have proven that technology-based platforms can improve awareness and uptake of lifelong learning programmes. Education institutions and training providers in Malaysia can leverage on these technological tools and developments to power our own lifelong learning initiatives.

Establish System for Accrediting Lifelong Learning Programmes

Accreditation and approval are part of any quality assurance (QA) process in higher education. They ensure that education providers conform to set rules and regulations and protect the rights of stakeholders and students. Accreditation is also a way to boost confidence and trust, thus potentially encouraging a greater number of people to enrol into courses and programmes – an especially important exercise for private institutions. In the specific context of working adults, accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and recognition of prior learning (RPL) are pertinent concepts as they can encourage people to look at their experiences and careers from a learning perspective.

Accreditation of courses and programmes can be implemented under the MQA. As the national body responsible for accreditation and monitoring of all higher education programmes, the MQA can establish a basis to create a structured continuum between qualifications or even between institutions. Effectively, the MQA can play an active role in assisting individuals with basic certificates to upgrade their qualifications through higher levels of study. Making this pathway a straightforward and coherent part of the lifelong learning structure can potentially encourage greater numbers of people to actively participate in lifelong learning initiatives.

Establish a Career Path for Lifelong Learners

This is in direct relation and consequence to the accreditation initiative and links to adult education. Creating an avenue through which working adults can access relevant and constructive learning opportunities can be included as part of a structure that also professionally rewards acquisition of new knowledge and skills by identifying such initiatives with promotions and career advancement. This can be achieved through learning-friendly human resource policies as well as educating organisations and employers about the benefits of encouraging employees to evolve as knowledge workers.

Learn from Others

International success stories have proven that lifelong learning can play a major role in a national education structure, such as those demonstrated by South Korea and several European nations. For instance, South Korea has been implementing the Credit Bank System (CBS) since 1997 (UNESCO, 2001) as a way to recognise diverse learning experiences, whether from formal, non-formal and informal means, as well as to foster lifelong learning in the country. South Korea has proven that a system like the CBS can formally recognise and accredit many forms of learning, enhance the standing of non-formal education and encourage people to continue learning. We can learn to implement a similar system here by consolidating open entry, APEL and RPL – which are already practised in several local higher education institutions such as Open University Malaysia (OUM) – as a functional and effective component in the Malaysian lifelong learning structure.

Other international initiatives that can provide useful perspectives include Denmark's focus on adult liberal education; Sweden's take on 'life-wide' learning that strives to give equal recognition to all forms education; and Belgium's efforts to enhance the relationship between initial and in-service vocational training for relevant employees.

Conclusion

It is imperative at this point to reiterate that the above strategies are recommendations focused on lifelong learning in the context of working adults, as well as concerned with seeing the Blueprint's many initiatives come to fruition. Ensuring that working adults can grasp and appreciate the concept of lifelong learning will be an important factor in our achieving the goals of 'Wawasan 2020', which embodies the Malaysian aspiration of a fully-developed, industrialised and self-sustaining nation. Specific to lifelong learning, the unveiling of the Blueprint is something we need to acknowledge as an important initiative that concerns not only educational development, but societal advancement as well.

At this juncture, following through with tangible actions and outcomes at a national scale should be given emphasis in this lifelong learning agenda. Each individual, agency and stakeholder has a role to play to ensure that the national lifelong learning agenda can be translated into reality; particularly with respect to boosting Malaysia's drive for human capital development.

The following concluding suggestions are a summary of the roles of all Malaysians can play in encouraging lifelong learning:

- The Government needs to facilitate this agenda through a systematic structure via a designated lifelong learning agency;
- Financial institutions and relevant human resource and development funds need to contribute financial assistance to the lifelong learning cause;
- Employers need to inculcate lifelong learning as part of organisational culture as well as to encourage employees to partake in professional, work-based or continuing education courses and programmes;
- Employees, members of the workforce and Malaysian citizens in general need to understand and embody the concept of lifelong learning; and
- ICT developments can play a major role in enabling lifelong learning initiatives, whether at the promotional or implementation stages.

As a final suggestion, MOE can shed some light on the actual current achievements initially recommended in November 2011 through a medium-term review of the Blueprint. This should give us a better understanding of where we stand, as well as provide future directions in the lifelong learning context. While the very release of the Blueprint signifies a milestone in Malaysian education, it would eventually be rendered meaningless unless every one of us – the Government, higher education providers, other educational institutions, training outfits, employers, members of the workforce, and the Malaysian people – plays an active part in this immensely crucial national agenda.

References

- Economic Planning Unit. (2013, December 26). *The Malaysian Economy in Figures 2013*. Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.epu.gov.my/en/the-malaysian-economy-in-figures-2013>
- Freifeld, L. (2011, October 13). *Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning*. Retrieved November 5, 2014, from <http://www.trainingmag.com/content/creating-culture-lifelong-learning>
- Kuncinas, P. (2014, October 25). *Budget Boost for Malaysia's ICT Sector*. Retrieved November 4, 2014, from <http://www.theborneopost.com/2014/10/25/budget-boost-for-malaysias-ict-sector/>
- Lee, M. N. N. (2005). Global Trends, National Policies and Institutional Responses: Restructuring Higher Education in Malaysia. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 3, pp. 31-46.

UNESCO. (2001). Case Study: Korea – The Korean Credit Bank System. In *Handbook of Effective Implementation of Continuing Education at the Grassroots* (pp. 145-152). Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO.

Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Wawasan 2020*. Retrieved November 3, 2014, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wawasan_2020