LIFELONG LEARNING FROM THE EYES OF STUDENT LEADERS – CURRENT ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

Lifelong learning serves as a platform for increasing quality of life. Once learners are enrolled in lifelong learning programmes, they automatically have access to knowledge and are able to increase their capacity to perform better both at home and at work. Opportunities open for either new jobs or increases in salaries in current jobs. This means that lifelong learners are able to improve their quality of life enjoying improved lifestyles and being able to tap into new avenues and opportunities. Lifelong learning has now become integral to the growth of the country. With the introduction of lifelong learning in Malaysia, many programmes have been implemented still many are in the pipeline. It is thus essential that we stop and evaluate at the current status of lifelong learning in the country. This research is part of a bigger research which looks at the success and impact of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan. This paper, will however, present the findings regarding the current issues, challenges and future expectations of student leaders in the country with regard to the implementation of lifelong learning. This is a qualitative study which uses focus groups as its main source of data. Findings show that there are indeed many issues and challenges that are inherent in the country's pursuit to enculturate lifelong learning. The main finding is that higher education institutions, community colleges and other institutions should provide community service in terms of providing avenues for local community to acquire academic qualification or obtain job-related skills training with minimal entry requirement and flexible learning schedule.

Introduction

Lifelong learning serves as a platform for increasing quality of life. Once learners are enrolled in lifelong learning programmes, they automatically have access to knowledge and are able to increase their capacity to perform better both at home and at work. Opportunities open for either new jobs or increases in salaries in current jobs. This means that lifelong learners are able to improve their quality of life enjoying improved lifestyles and being able to tap into new avenues and opportunities. With the increased capacity to access knowledge and the improved lifestyle, lifelong learners begin to harness the benefits of their efforts. The ability to use the internet academically allows them to explore beyond the borders of the country. Communication with peers increases and with this comes new knowledge and bridges are built with new horizons. Self confidence increases and learners initiate measures to improve themselves – this in essence leads to the world class mentality that the Malaysian Higher Education National Strategic Plan is aiming for.

Literature Review

Education is also one of the most critical drivers for Malaysia's transformation to a developed and high-income nation due its impact on productivity and human capital development (Chea, Norbaini and NurAzlin, 2011) where lifelong learning is a function of education. Lifelong learning can be defined 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 will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments (Longworth and Davies,1996).

In Malaysia, lifelong learning is defined as 'learning engaged by everyone of age 15 and 64 years and above except professional students' where 'Professional students' are those who enroll in a school, college or university with the sole aim of acquiring an academic qualification as first time entrants into the labour force (MOHE, 2011). Individuals above 64 years old include the retirees and the homemakers. The most common element present in all the definitions is that every individual, regardless of gender, age, race and socio-economic background has an equal opportunity to adjust to the demands of social and economic changes and to participate actively in shaping the country's future (MOHE, 2011).

Lifelong learning has now become integral to the growth of a country especially with the changing role of universities. The role of the university in the knowledge-based economy is "not just as a creator of knowledge, a trainer of young minds and a transmitter of culture, but also as a major agent of economic growth: the knowledge factory, as it were, at the centre of the knowledge economy" (David, 1997:4). The commonly held perception of universities as merely institutions of higher learning is gradually giving way to the view that universities are important engines of economic growth and development (Chrisman *et al*. (1995)). This new direction has boded well for institutions providing lifelong learning education especially those in the open and distance learning environment.

Su (2011) iterated that one of the aims of higher education is to establish students' lifelong learning abilities, yet different authors remain divided on the question of what constitutes 'lifelong learning ability'. Su further stated that the knowledge, skills and competences that students acquire in higher education are undoubtedly important for enabling students to cope with the uncertainties that life offers. Students should be fully engaged in order to sustain learning activities. In this fast changing world, higher education curricula and pedagogy need to emphasise the ideas of lifelong learning and its importance (Candy and Crebert 1991; Knapper and Cropley 2000).

Methodology

This is a qualitative research with data collected through a series of focus group discussions. Student leaders from universities were invited to take part in a series of group discussions throughout the months of April to July 2013. These focus groups were held throughout Malaysia in selected locations. This was done to identify trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed by different groups, collect information and identify good or bad practises (Brozaitis *et. al*., 2010). This method is useful for getting insight into the context of implementation, understanding different views and potential factors influencing implementation and possibly determining impacts of intervention. The interview transcripts from the focus group were then analysed using content analysis and themes were identified.

Findings

How Higher Education Institutions Supports Lifelong Learning

The first area that the focus group on students looked into was how higher education institutions supported lifelong learning.

In terms of facilities, the students indicated that there are currently still problems in terms of system and internet connections on campus. Thus there is a need for better internet facilities and better access to learning materials such as e-books and on-line journals. Students also indicated that they need a more interactive learning process which should include graphics and notes.

The students saw higher educational institutions playing a role in their personal development. According to them, high education institutions develop their personality and increase their competency thereby enhancing their employability and marketability. In essence, to them, higher education institutions actually "teach them how to live".

In terms of academic learning, students found that higher education institutions increased their capacity to gain knowledge and lifelong learning serves as a medium for knowledge sharing. With lifelong learning, there is an opportunity for them to further their studies, not only locally but overseas as they found that the local curriculum is of equal standard to those overseas.

Higher education institutions which provide lifelong learning also serve as a training platform for skill development – not only in specific work skills but also in enhancing soft skills. Some institutions provide free education to the public and these programmes often contributes to spiritual development and teach the students about real life. Some programmes are successful on not only creating employees but also entrepreneurs. In this sense, lifelong learning is able to produce human resource with the skills and knowledge needed to adapt to the prevailing environment. Lifelong learning is seen to enhance students' academic capabilities and abilities, helping them to enhance themselves physically and psychologically, in order to achieve a better quality of life.

The focus group on students also found that higher education institutions play a role in developing society through lifelong learning. The first role is providing community service whereby institutions provide the community with the opportunity to continue their studies either in an academic programme or skills training programme. This enhancement of the local community will also contribute to the local economy and serve as a medium for it to move up the value chain.

Lifelong learning further provides easy access to education for the community at large as they are not restricted by traditional academic entry requirements and also fixed timetables. However, the role played by higher education institutions in providing lifelong learning is still not widely known and the students in the focus groups stressed that these institutions should reach out more aggressively to community in order to attract more students.

The students in the focus groups also made the following recommendations with regard to the management of universities.

(a)   There should be less bureaucracy in management.

(b)   Student intake should be based on meritocracy.

(c)   There should be increased collaborations between:

   (i)   Institutions – including universities, polytechnics and community colleges.

   (ii)   Public and private universities.

   (iii) Universities and industries.

(d)   Higher education institutions should be free from political-motives, intervention and agendas.

Where teaching and learning pedagogy is concerned, the students were of the opinion that lifelong learning in higher education institutions should be based on the student-centred learning approach. The syllabus used should be more practical than academic and a blended learning approach should be implemented supported by high technology facilities in teaching and learning. The course content should also be related to the socio-economic environment and match the need of the workforce or industry. Course offerings should also be matched to the student intake and demand. The students were of the opinion that where possible, financial support should be given to those who cannot afford education on their own.

Perceived Positive Developments in Lifelong Learning

Overall, students in the focus group perceive that there have been positive developments in lifelong learning. They stated that higher education institutions which provided lifelong learning generally have a good course structure which cover both academic and skills development. Practical training and industrial attachment are also included as part of the curriculum and these provide real-life working experience for the students. They appreciate the exposure to new methods of learning and the development of ideas during learning that help them realise their dreams. According to the students, the course structures also meet the requirement of industry. The flexibility in class schedules is also important to the students.

The volunteer programmes and social work organised by higher education institutions also help students improve themselves in terms of social communication. Students also indicated that the lecturers in their lifelong learning programmes were very effective in their teaching and were able to motivate the students. They were good and knowledgeable and very good in giving feedback. Most of them were portrayed to be "more than lecturers – they were very dedicated, talented and motivated." The students were also satisfied that the learning content was based on established theories and practical research which allows them to gain knowledge and facts based on the real world.

Findings from the focus group also found that there was sufficient funding for students in lifelong learning. Loans are being provided by higher education institutions and there is ample financial assistance for those who are in need. Higher education institutions also provide funds to conduct research and some students are also eligible for monthly allowance and waived tuition fees.

Problems Faced by Students Taking Up Lifelong Learning

Findings from the focus group discussions highlighted some issues and problems faced by students taking up lifelong learning.

The first one is related to internet access where many students commented on poor wi-fi connections and difficulty in accessing universities' intranet particularly during peak periods such as course registration. Some students also expressed their dissatisfaction regarding library facilities. Many remarked that the libraries are not well maintained and that books in the collections were mostly old editions. E-journal collections are also limited especially in new areas such as Islamic Banking and Finance.

Although most students were satisfied with funding, many voiced their displeasure over the high cost of living and high cost of books. Some higher education institutions are also said to have high fees with little or no scholarships.

Where course offering is concerned, students cited a few issues that they were concerned about. Some of the issues were general such as difficulty in course pre-registration and too few courses offered. The more pertinent issues were those related to academia. Students voiced their view that courses in lifelong learning should be more practical than theoretical and should be actually application based. They also voiced their opinion that the course content should differ between the courses and there should be minimal content overlap. Study plans or course structure should also be carefully taught out as some students cited cases where English language courses are taught in the final year even though they are first year courses. Students also wanted more practical learning hours than lecture hours.

Where credit transfer is concerned, students in the focus groups cited some cases where they could only transfer subjects instead of transferring credits. They also stated that is was difficult to transfer credit between institutions. Some students suggested that the implementation of problem-based learning be improved to increase effectiveness.

Findings from the student focus groups also highlighted several problems with regard to lecturers:

1. Lecturers read slides.

2. Lecturers are too busy with other work that make it difficult for students to consult them.
3. Lecturers are too busy with research that they hardly involve or take note of students' programmes.

4. Last minute cancellation of classes without due notice.

5. Teaching techniques/skills: Boring and inconsistent lecturers who ignore students' questions and opinions.

6. Assignments are done for lecturer's research interest (conduct survey, do report) instead of for the benefit of learning a course.

7. Go against the etiquette by "addressing" individual's sensitivity.

8. Some lecturers are assigned to courses which are beyond their specialization.

9. Difficulty to communicate with lecturers; to get consultation, feedback, justification, or advise.

10. Some lecturers being unfair in marking exams/assignments due to their biased perception on students.

Although these issues might refer to only a few cases, there is a need to look into them to further improve the quality of education in the country.

Student Leaders' Recommendations for Improvements

The student focus groups made some very useful suggestions for improvements in lifelong learning in higher education institutions. These suggestions are summarised below:

ICT Facilities
State-of-the art and reliable internet/wi-fi as well as teaching/learning facilities should be made available
Good maintenance of existing facilities
Free software/applications for students to enhance learning experience/process

Information Sharing
University websites should be informative, updated, and maintained
Integrated university database: information sharing between different divisions and departments to increase knowledge sharing

Library Facilities
More books should be made available
More e-books should be made available
All universities should pool to create and share e-database of journals
To have one dedicated website for all students to get access to all e-books

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Funding
Scholarships to be given to excellent students
More sources of funding and scholarships to enhance students' learning experience and ease personal difficulties
Lower cost of higher education

Course Offerings
Course offerings to incorporate more practical case studies
Courses should not be too focused on recall/knowledge but rather more on innovative knowledge exchange and practicality of the courses
To be revised to accommodate changes in time, trend, needs and preference of the market
Balance between academic and curriculum activities
Focus on relevant courses to a chosen academic programmes
Abolish area of specialisation during 1st degree to develop holistic personalities
Emphasis on field works or industrial attachments; opportunity to practice what have been leant/taught in classes
Periodic review of course offerings to meet the industry needs
Education system should focus more on producing entrepreneurs instead of employees
Student workload should not be a burden to students
More practical approach to teaching and learning
Periodically reviewed courses according to industry needs
Students have clear expectations on how courses/programmes studied at higher education institutions could be applied in working life
Shorten the duration of degree programmes
A balance of theory and practical aspect of education

Assessment Method
More questions on problem solving instead of theory
Should not be exam-oriented
More practical assignments

Lecturers
To be assessed on the quality of their teaching and research to improve the quality of universities
Focus on improving teaching and learning approach and effectiveness
A good system of academic welfare must be in place to motivate lecturers
Change the culture by hiring more fresh graduates to reduce generation gap between management and students
Employ talented lecturers
Should take courses on psychology to improve communication with students

University as an Institution
To develop good relation with the industry in order to facilitate students in getting employment
To provide opportunity for those interested to further studies but without academic qualifications, especially from rural areas
A place of innovation, creativity, imaginary, arts and freedom - not a "brain wash" place
More employers instead of employees being produced
Higher education institutions for all people; everybody could study at Higher education institutions
Entry requirement: should be 70% based on academic achievements and 30% based on talent/personal abilities
Open university to the society so that the gap between university and society is reduced
Should nurture the mentality to serve for humanity
Higher education institutions should be the good hub of research and innovations (*innovate things*)
Universities' programmes should focus on developing communities in rural areas
To create more platforms for students to enter university regardless of background
Collaboration between public and private sectors for students development; bring professionals/practitioners to give lectures or lecturers sent to industries to give courses
More interactive process
100% E-learning: online learning and materials; students learn via video conferencing; virtual classroom; students do not have to go to classroom
Students involve in research activities
Student-centred approach
High-technology facility
More practical approach
50% evaluated based on academic (classroom learning) and 50% evaluated based on internship (work performance)
100% online submissions of assignments
Under graduate students are made compulsory to involve in researches conducted by post graduate students
UG degree duration is reduced
Research and Innovation becomes the core
Students learn using laptops/tabs instead of hard copy textbooks; more T&L activities done online
More peer-tutoring

Education Expectation/Requirement on the Citizens
Minimum qualification for the Malaysian citizen is diploma
Higher education qualification should be imposed to all citizens, at least diploma
Value of degree qualification will be lesser and minimum becomes masters; PG degree qualification becomes requirement
Higher education should be accessible to all people *(mothers, fathers, elderly)* instead of only SPM or STPM holders; Higher education institutions to all; Higher education institutions for whoever wants to learn or improve themselves

Analysis and Discussion

From the findings above it can be concluded that for students, higher education institutions are the platform for personal development in order to develop their personality, skills, knowledge and competency thus enhancing their employability and social well-being. Higher education institutions are also seen as medium for knowledge sharing and evolution wherein innovation, invention, and creativity are well stimulated. Therefore, by intensifying lifelong initiatives, students could acquire worldwide knowledge, curriculum and content without the need to physically study abroad.

Existing IT facilities however, is not adequate, they need good maintenance and continuous improvements including more reliable and faster access to network as well as greater access to online learning materials (e-books, e-journals, and lecture materials). Currently, students face difficulty to access the university's intranet particularly during course pre-registration and peak hours. In addition, library facilities need upgrading with regard to collections of reading materials that are described as outdated and limited. This is especially true for new field of knowledge (or niche areas) such as Islamic Banking and Finance students could recognise positive developments at higher education institutions in stimulating lifelong in terms of course structure that support both academic and skills developments. In particular, inclusion of practical training and industrial attachment modules provide real working life exposure to students that are regarded as beneficial.

These facts support Ott's (2011) view that IT factors must be taken into account when designing, developing, and implementing educational programs to the lifelong adult learner as they have unique experiences and different educational backgrounds. In particular, he has advocated the use of e-learning technologies which has helped make synchronous class meetings a reality for many online classes. A student however must not only have the discipline to take this course but must possess the attitude to excel in this environment.

They also experience increasing adaptation of new learning methods that has helped them in realising their ambitions and accommodate the needs of the industry. Yet, existing study plans and course structures need continuous improvement so that minimal content overlap between courses and they are always relevant to current market needs.

The European Union (2013) identified eight competencies for lifelong learning. As well as communication in the mother tongues, competence in foreign languages, in maths, science and technology; digital competence; the skill of learning to learn; a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, social and civic competences, they also identify the importance of cultural awareness and expression. All these should be incorporated when designing the curriculum and selecting the method for imparting knowledge to learners.

Students also described some of their lecturers as not being effective in teaching and are too busy with research activities that they are not available for consultation, feedback and student programmes. Therefore, a mechanism is needed to ensure workload and expectations on academicians are realistic to optimize their motivation, commitment and performance. A note must be made here that the students in the focus groups are mostly from public universities in the country and therefore might not reflect some of the institutions that are currently actively engaged in lifelong learning.

It should also be noted that learners themselves need to fulfil certain characteristics of lifelong learners and not depend one hundred percent on the lecturers. Knowles for example, (1980, 1984, 1998) identified four underlining properties of adult learners. First, he identified the learner as self-directed and independent in the pursuit of information. Second, the real life experience of the learner must be acknowledged and built upon. Third, the readiness to learn is driven from the learners' occupational and social roles. Finally, the learner is driven by the possibility for immediate application of the knowledge or skill.

Students also recommended increased collaborations between Higher education institutions (among public and/or universities, polytechnics and community colleges) to enable sharing and pooling of resources including subject matter experts, learning and reference materials. This should include involvement of professionals or practitioners in lectures for selected courses. It will also improve students' access to reading and reference materials including the breadth of library collection, subscriptions to online databases and e-books via universities network. Free education (if not minimal fees) to the public in the form of seminars, courses, particularly related to spiritual development and life skills are necessary.

All these support Dhanarajan's view (2007) that for lifelong learning to be successful, it needs to fulfill certain preconditions:

1. There must be *access and equity* to learning.

2. Human right and learning must become normal and central to a person's life.

3. There must be *empowerment and engagement* in learning.

4. There must be *flexibility* in learning to cater for the diverse needs of learners.

5. There must be *awareness* among learners and *availability* of programmes suited to their needs.

6. There must be *learner-centredness* where learners should be the central focus of all learning ventures.

The research also found that although many policies are in place and many programmes implemented, there are still issues and challenges to be solved. This is in line with the experience from overseas countries which have implemented lifelong learning. As Chisolm (2013:276) states:

"There is also plenty of research evidence to demonstrate that existing policies, systems and practices do not make lifelong learning a reality for all, and in many ways manage to achieve the reverse – a classic example of the unintended and pernicious consequences of social action".

Conclusion

Based on the findings from the research and the analysis done, it is recommended that higher education institutions should provide community service in terms of providing avenues for local community to acquire academic qualification or obtain job-related skills training with minimal entry requirement and flexible learning schedule. Higher education institutions should give opportunity to learn to everybody who is interested to study to improve themselves. They should actively be involved in the development of local community, especially rural areas. On the other hand, university management should aim to become "training" centres that create entrepreneurs instead of only employees. The focus should be more on enriching soft skills and give a balanced emphasis on students' academic and curriculum achievements. Further, management of higher education institutions should be made less bureaucratic, are free from political agendas or interventions. Further, an integrated university database is also necessary for effective information sharing between different divisions and departments for efficient knowledge sharing. Lastly, lecturers and learners themselves should be equipped with the necessary skills and attitudes that are required in the teaching and learning of lifelong learning.

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