LIFELONG LEARNING IN REALITY:
THE PERCEPTION OF THE COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Lifelong learning is an important part of the education system in Malaysia and has been implemented in various sectors of the economy. It has been used as a tool to promote learning in order to transform the country into a knowledge economy. Lifelong learning has taken various forms from formal education to informal classes, from long term to short term and from face-to-face classes, blended classes to fully online classes. This research presents the findings from community focus groups which were held over a few months in various locations in the country. The objective of the research was to gauge the perception of the community regarding lifelong learning in Malaysia. Data was analysed through reduction analysis and reported in narrative form. Findings reported differences in opinion regarding the modes of learning, the curriculum offered, the attitudes of learners and the objective of taking up lifelong learning. Other issues brought up included the financial aspects of lifelong learning and also the culture and values of lifelong learners. The paper concludes by giving recommendations for improvements based on the analysis given.

Introduction

Lifelong learning has been implemented in the country as a means to achieve economic development by educating the citizens of Malaysia. This research is part of a bigger research which looks at the social impact of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan to the country. This paper presents the findings from the community focus groups which were conducted to gauge the perception of the community where lifelong learning is concerned.

Literature Review

The last decade has seen a large amount of time and effort invested in developing lifelong learning policies across the world (Chisolm, 2013). Many policy documents have been developed and reform programmes and action have been taken to ensure lifelong learning is implemented worldwide. Schuller and Watson (2009) described lifelong learning as learning which covers people of all ages learning in different contexts – in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities. To them, lifelong learning focuses mainly on adults returning to organised learning rather than on the initial period of education or on incidental learning.

According to Uggla (2008) lifelong learning has come to be the most important strategy to overcome the challenges brought about by globalisation by supporting a fast transition to a knowledge-based economy. He describes the goal of lifelong learning as economics-related, a way to promote skills and competencies, capabilities and specific performance in the work place. This increase in knowledge and skills is further seen as a source of competitive advantage in the rapidly growing world economy.

The European Comission (2001) defined lifelong learning as ''all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'' (European Commission 2001).

The Malaysian lifelong learning Blueprint defines LLL 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*" (MOHE, 2011).

Distance learning was founded on the growing need for skills upgrading and retraining as well as the technologies that make it possible to teach and learn at a distance (Daniel, 2002). Latifah and Ramli (2012) found that open and distance learning (ODL) and e-learning are increasingly seen as key to providing access to the wider student population now seeking higher education, especially working adults and those in remote rural areas. Their research showed that the new model of providing education to the masses by adopting an ODL approach takes care of the cost factor while increasing access and quality of learning by leveraging on ICT. This is supported by Anuwar (2011) who found that education has been democratized through ODL and everyone can pursue education at any point in their lives. Education is now not only for the privileged chosen few. This is important as widening the access to education will have a great impact on the country as succinctly put by Anuwar (2010: 3):

> *An equitable education also involves enhancing the quality of the workforce. It is necessary for the workforce to be imbued with knowledge and skills relevant to the current environment. Equitable access must thus also encompass access to quality education. At the higher education level, this is particularly pertinent. If universities attest their function as the grounds for knowledge creation, then the knowledge must also attest to be useful to their students, and at a larger scale, beneficial to the country. Therefore, educating the workforce has a direct impact on a country's economic output and the quality of life enjoyed by the community.*

Open and distance learning institutions usually apply a blended or hybrid pedagogy where learners attend a minimal number of classes while doing most of their studying independently via online platforms, audio- and/or video lessons, broadcasted television/radio programmes or other multimedia (Latifah, Mansor and Norlia, 2012). This flexible learning mode is one of the most prominent reason why ODL is an attractive mode of learning for working adults.

The expansion of lifelong learning in the country has also been spurred by the rapid utilization of IT in education – the use of multimedia materials, virtual libraries, mobile technology, social networking platforms and other applications such as Web 2.0 and Wiki (Latifah, Mansor and Norlia, 2011). This has enabled lifelong learning teaching technologies, facilities and resources have reduced the need for physical presence in a classroom environment. Integrating e-learning with lifelong learning enables learners to engage in more experiential discovery, engaged learning, differentiated teaching and the building of character through innovative and effective teaching approaches and strategies (Subramaniam, Kandasamy and Yusoff, 2011).

Cappon and Laughlin (2013) found that transformative change in lifelong learning usually occur at the community level, rather than only at the provincial or national level. According to them, the main consensus throughout learning communities is the explicit use of lifelong learning as a key source of economic regeneration, democratic participation, social inclusiveness and cohesion. Learning communities promote leaning amongst individuals and groups at all stages of life.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on findings from focus group studies conducted with community groups. A series of focus groups were conducted all over the country to get input from the community with regards to their perception regarding lifelong learning in Malaysia.

Table 1 presents the location and dates of the focus groups which consisted of various groups of people in the community.

Table 1: Specification of the Location and the Dates of the Focus Group

LOCATION	DATE
Kuala Lumpur	12 June 2013
Penang	13 & 15 June 2013
Kedah	23 June 2013
Johor	30 June 2013
Ipoh	6 July 2013
Terengganu	13 July 2013

Data from the focus groups were analysed using the data reduction method as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984).

Findings

Community focus groups were carried out throughout Malaysia to identify and clarify the issues and challenges that have permeated the implementation of lifelong learning in the country. These issues and challenges are presented in this section of the paper.

Firstly, there is generally a generation gap between students and their educators where the current teaching and learning approach is no longer feasible. The current generation is very IT savvy and prefer to surf on the internet and use gadgets compared to the educators who use a more traditional approach to teaching.

It was suggested that a new approach be adopted where students can learn using what they like e.g. social network and IT gadgets. Where lifelong learning is concerned, this issue becomes more pertinent as there is not only the current younger generation to consider but the various older generations as well.

Most lifelong learning institutions use the blended mode of learning where distance learning is the main method used to transfer learning. On-line learning platforms consist of videos and other learning materials which are uploaded for student use, supported by on-line forums which allow for interaction between students and lecturers.

This mode is actually interesting for the current younger generation as they prefer to study from home and like to browse the internet to search for materials. However, this mode of learning is not conducive for the older generation of students who are not internet savvy and still prefer to learn via the traditional classroom methods.

Taking this in mind, higher education institutions who engage in lifelong learning should match the mode of learning to the students who enrol in their programmes. This is very important so that learning and the transfer of knowledge is maximised.

Another issue raised in the community focus group is that students believe that all their needs should be fulfilled, however illogical they may be.

This might be a result of "the customer is always right" syndrome where students put themselves in the shoes of customers and lecturers are the service providers. This is becoming a danger as many students believe that they should get high grades or pass just because they are paying for their tuition fees. This is especially true in lifelong learning where most students are adult learners and think they do have the "right" to everything!

It shows lack of awareness on the part of Malaysian students that they enrol in lifelong learning because they simply want a certificate. The education system should inculcate the correct culture where students embark on their studies because they actually want to learn something and improve themselves. They should be made to understand that learning takes a lot of hard work and the effort that they put in would ultimately be translated into the results that they actually achieve.

Another issue which was highlighted in the community focus groups was that students of HE do not exhibit a culture of reading. This is disappointing as Malaysia aims in becoming a knowledge economy.

However, this issue cannot be tackled at the higher education stage but in schools when they are still young. The reading habit should be inculcated as early as kindergarten so that the habit will follow through when the students reach university level. Where lifelong learning is concerned, there should be classes on reading and literature where adult learners can actually be trained to appreciate reading and the benefits that come with it. The reading habit could also be streamlined with the new IT age where students should be taught to download e-books and browse the internet to do their reading. As reading is the path to knowledge and education, there should be a conscious effort to promote the reading habit until we can emulate the West where people actually read in coffee shops and on the train instead of listening to the iPod or browsing through social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Another important issue gathered from the community focus groups was that HE graduates are too dependent and shy. This is further linked to another issue of employers finding HE graduates not competent in soft skills such as oral communication and not being able to perform in job interviews.

One would think that this would not be true where lifelong learning is concerned as most of the students are adult learners and have work experience. However, the same issue does arise amongst lifelong learners as well. The dependence and shyness is often due to lack of confidence either in the subject area or because of their advanced age. The lack of soft skills like communication also span across lifelong learners although not as widespread as with undergraduate students in fulltime HEIs. This is due to the fact that most of them are working. Therefore, they do have the necessary basic communication skills. Nevertheless, they still need to improve these skills to satisfy employer needs. It is suggested that this is incorporated into the education system as early as in kindergarten so that the skill is already ingrained in the learners once they reach university. At the university level, more training and workshops should be conducted to improve these soft skills – the level of which should be the standards required by employers in the industry.

The community focus group also raised the issue of students unable to repay their PTPTN loans due to financial difficulties. It was suggested that students be taught to manage their finance properly.

Another finding from the community focus groups is that higher education graduates do not exhibit an acceptable level of moral values as shown in their lack of courteousness, respect, and discipline. It was suggested that the curriculum take this up so that our graduates have the necessary moral values to guide them in their future life.

However, this actually contradicts another issue brought up, that of the curriculum covering compulsory religious and moral studies which have nothing to do with the students' course concentration and take a huge portion of the students' learning period.

Perhaps, the real issue is the lack of understanding of the importance of religion and moral issues on the part of the students. Most of them regard these subjects as additional subjects that do not have merit or contribute to their core discipline. Thus, educators, either teachers at the school level or lecturers at the HE level should take more effort to inculcate the necessary moral values and make them understand the important of values in their future life – how it can actually shape their personality and future. Where lifelong learning is concerned, the

shaping of moral values is still important and the effort to educate learners should not only be continued but enhanced.

Another issue that came out of the community focus groups is that students today are doing research for the sake of certification, not to help the community. This issue was especially true in the rural areas where the students left the community once they obtained their degree.

It was recommended that steps be taken to increase awareness on the importance of giving back to the community once students have obtained their degrees or certification. The important benefits of giving back to the community such as knowledge sharing, improving quality of work life, and economic benefits of having qualified workers in the community are all key aspects that should be highlighted to the students. A structured approach could also be adopted where data on students for each community are recorded and they are required to contribute a certain number of hours to the community while they are studying or after they graduate.

The community focus groups also highlighted the issue of the current education system being too focused on examinations and research produced but not much on the learning experience.

For lifelong learning, the issue is not that critical as most of the learners are already in the workplace and have ample work experience. They come to higher education institutions to gain knowledge on theories and can actually apply the knowledge learnt to their own workplace immediately. However, the way the knowledge is transferred or the teaching and learning process should take this into consideration in all HEIs so that maximum gains are achieved.

The final issue highlighted by the community focus groups is that the intakes in HEIs are not time-efficient and are not streamlined with the STPM results. However, this issue does not really affect lifelong learners as they are already in the work place.

Analysis and Discussion

The focus of policies for lifelong learning has shifted strongly in the direction of its economic function (Martin, 2002; Crowther, 2004). Here lifelong learning is predominantly approached as the production of human capital, both for the benefit of society as whole – where lifelong learning is linked up with the idea of the knowledge economy – and for the benefit of the individual – where lifelong learning is presented as an investment in one's own employability.

Governments and administrations have greater interest in showing the positive outcomes of policy action (Chisolm, 2013). They are more than likely to select and focus on the positive features of information available. More critical and independent research studies, both quantitative and qualitative are needed. Here, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia, has shown great initiative with the numerous research they have commissioned in lifelong learning in the country. However, the focus group findings show that most learners enrol in courses just to get a certificate and do not exhibit the necessary mindset, attitude and skills that are required of lifelong learners.

The findings and recommendations also support Bengtsson's (2013) view that in order for lifelong learning to grow faster and more efficiently, there must be workable and agreed-upon strategies for implementation, a coherent and equitable system of financing lifelong learning for all and overcoming the resistance to change among the main stakeholders in the traditional system of education. The method used for teaching should shift towards IT based components which are suitable for learners and proper financing should be given for the learners who cannot afford PSPTN loans.

The findings also show that further focus should be made on Aspin and Chapman's (2001) view that there are three different agendas for lifelong learning: lifelong learning for economic progress and development; lifelong learning for personal development and fulfilment; and lifelong learning for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity. Thus, different types of courses for lifelong learning should be developed in line with these agendas to fulfil the different needs of the market.

Jackson (2012) argued that lifelong learning is currently directed mainly at those who are in the labour market, and especially younger people. She suggested that lifelong learning and community participation is particularly important for older women who might be marginalised in a society that only recognises vocational skills, that prioritises skills development for younger people, and that places very little value on skills traditionally developed in the home. Her research showed that older women learners' engagement with lifelong learning can enable them to make an active and positive contribution to society. This view is supported by Merrian and Kee (2014) who argued that the promotion of lifelong learning among older adults can positively contribute to the success of a community. The aging society is a worldwide phenomenon presenting both opportunities and challenges to community wellbeing. Research suggests that the more active, healthier, and educated older adults are, the less drain they are on family and community resources and services. Lifelong learning activities of older adults increase both human and social capital. As older adults become more knowledgeable and more socially engaged, personal as well as community wellbeing will be enhanced.

This is further evidenced by research which show that the more active, social, healthy, and educated older adults are, the less drain they are on a family's and, by extension, a community's resources and services (Bjorklund, 2011; Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Withnall, 2012).

Conclusion

From the perspective of the community, lifelong learning will be an effective means to improve an individual's quality of life when learning institutions could offer flexible learning platforms and become agent to nurture correct learning culture. Lifelong learning institutions are to provide learning system that is capable of accommodating the needs of both younger and older generations, particularly with regards to the use of online resources and social network, in order to optimize learning and knowledge transfer. Consequently, due attention is to be given by the institutions in creating students' awareness of plagiarism as a serious academic offence. Further, learning assessment should not be examination oriented instead should enhance experiential learning and encourage value added activities (via projects, research) to students' local society (family, workplace, residence, community). Lifelong learning institutions are to cultivate learning or the sake of knowledge, enforce reading as the fundamental of learning, require moral conduct as requisite of everything, and advocate everybody is responsible for its community. Therefore, lifelong will improve students' future in terms of personality, knowledge and skills as well as financial credibility or strength. This is dangerous because the wrong motivation to pursue lifelong learning may give rise to unintended consequences such as students getting official certificates instead of gaining knowledge. Other concerns of the community include the need for improvement in financial support to pursue lifelong learning and the problems in the existing intake system.

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