

**ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub Forum
Bali, Indonesia
10-11 March 2015**

**THE ROLE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN HUMAN
CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT:
THE MALAYSIAN BLUEPRINT**

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Abstract

The introductory line “*lifelong learning is the third pillar in human capital development*” is the resounding and definitive statement from the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020). Unveiled in November 2011, the Blueprint represents the country’s first manifest address of this increasingly important component in the nation’s educational agenda. As the country braces herself for 2020 – a landmark year when we hope to achieve developed nation status, lifelong learning and the education of working adults and the labour force play a crucial role in any initiative leading to national development and economic progress. This is the fundamental reason behind the enhancement of human capital development – ensuring a knowledgeable and skilful workforce is a crucial factor for a robust and competitive economy. Now more than three years since the unveiling of the Blueprint, acculturating lifelong learning in Malaysia is still an ongoing process and there is much for all education stakeholders and other relevant agencies must accomplish in order to help Malaysia achieve her national aspirations. Such strategies to further the cause of lifelong learning include reviewing our current nationwide status; learning from global examples; and leveraging on various approaches to learning, including open and distance learning (ODL) and work-based professional development. This keynote address will describe lifelong learning and human capital development in the Malaysian context as well as introduce the Blueprint as an important document in this agenda. This paper will also introduce several global examples in lifelong learning that can help guide Malaysia to greater success in acculturating lifelong learning and ensure that this educational agenda can be translated into tangible outcomes. Finally, this paper will also briefly share some of the lifelong learning initiatives put forth by Open University Malaysia (OUM) with the hope of contributing to the overall development of the nation’s human capital.

I. INTRODUCTION

November 2011 marked an important milestone in Malaysian education. The unveiling of the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020) brought with it the declaration that lifelong learning is the third pillar in human capital development. It is now acknowledged as an educational agenda equally important for national progress as the other two pillars, i.e. the school and higher education systems. This novel attempt on the part of the Malaysian Government to bring focus to lifelong learning is as significant as the attention given to human capital development; demonstrating that Malaysia recognises that developing a robust and competitive economy must come through a knowledgeable and skilful workforce. The Blueprint's timeline also coincides with 'Vision 2020', Malaysia's decades-long national aspiration that denotes a landmark year when we hope to become a high-income economy and fully-developed nation.

It is in this context that lifelong learning plays such a crucial role in the Malaysian education sector, especially with regards to the continuing education needs of working adults. With about 8.8 million active participating individuals in the labour force making up almost a third of the 29.7 million Malaysian population at the end of 2013 (Economic Planning Unit (EPU), 2013), lifelong learning for this specific segment of the society must be brought to the forefront of this national educational agenda. Learning opportunities, whether through formal, non-formal or informal means, that can lead to upgrades in qualifications, as well as reskilling and upskilling in productive sectors, are crucial factors to a high-income economy.

The release of this Blueprint notwithstanding, we must realise that the end of its timeline is fast approaching. In this Blueprint, the Government acknowledges the current issues and challenges currently faced by Malaysia and have outlined the necessary steps to overcome them and acculturate lifelong learning at the national level. However, more than three years since its unveiling, the action plans and strategies outlined in the Blueprint are still part of an ongoing process.

Central to the lifelong learning initiative in Malaysia are fundamental challenges like increasing awareness, encouraging participation, as well as improving engagement between the academia, industry and other relevant agencies. The Government has enlisted at least 14 ministries and various agencies to participate in the Blueprint's initiatives, e.g. Ministry of

Education, Ministry of Human Resources and Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (Guan, 2014), although he also noted that despite some positive outcomes since 2011, continuous and concerted effort is needed to close the gaps in lifelong learning programmes to ensure the success of the Blueprint by 2020.

In examining global examples in lifelong learning, it has also become clear that the role of open and distance learning (ODL), particularly through an e-learning approach, is integral to the success of lifelong learning initiatives, especially amongst working adults. This is evident through the efforts of many open universities that leverage on e-learning to offer formal academic programmes as well as non-formal courses that often involve professional continuing development and work-based learning.

Adopting international practices, whether through ODL or traditional means, must be made part of a serious attempt to achieve tangible outcomes in this national lifelong learning endeavour. It is an exercise that needs to be given focus alongside other crucial strategies, including understanding the current status of lifelong learning in Malaysia, leveraging on various approaches and delivery methods in teaching and learning, as well as finding means to improve collaboration between the relevant institutions and agencies.

This paper will discuss lifelong learning and human capital development in the Malaysian context as well as introduce the Blueprint as an important document in this agenda. This paper will also introduce several global examples that can guide Malaysia to greater success in this lifelong learning endeavour. Finally, this paper will also briefly share some of the lifelong learning initiatives put forth by Open University Malaysia (OUM).

II. LIFELONG LEARNING AND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

As iterated in the previous section, at the end of 2013, the Malaysian population was close to 30 million and is expected to climb to 34.3 million by 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE), 2011). The working age population of 15-64 year-olds currently stands at about 20.4 million, representing a considerable potential pool of lifelong learners in the country (EPU, 2013). The current higher education participation rate of 18-22 year-olds stands at 36%, while

the percentage of labour force with tertiary qualifications is quite modest at 24% (Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), 2014).

These figures yield several key observations, i.e.:

- There is an immense number of potential lifelong learners in the country, many of whom are not yet active participants in the lifelong learning landscape;
- The majority of the country's labour force is currently not equipped in terms of qualifications and skills to contribute to a knowledge-based economy;
- Malaysia has yet to develop the talent base to match advanced countries [e.g. in 2007, Finland, Singapore, South Korea, United Kingdom and United States of America all reported labour force percentage with tertiary qualifications above 31% (EPU, 2010)]; and
- There is immense potential for Malaysia to leverage on lifelong learning for human capital and national development.

As the first step in acknowledging the importance of lifelong learning in Malaysia, the Blueprint lists four key strategies (MOHE, 2011) to address all current issues and challenges as well as to align lifelong learning to the educational and economic agenda of the nation. These strategies are:

1. Upgrading mechanisms and infrastructure for lifelong learning;
2. Enhancing public awareness and participation in lifelong learning;
3. Ensuring continuity and appreciation in lifelong learning; and
4. Providing financial support for lifelong learning.

These strategies reflect Malaysia's major concerns for lifelong learning, which are listed in the Blueprint as the absence of a full-fledged policy; lack of monitoring, awareness, participation and financial support; inadequate mechanisms and infrastructure; overlapping activities and programmes by different education providers; and recognition issues. To a certain extent, they also demonstrate the status of lifelong learning in the country. Similar to many other developing countries that have only recently focused on lifelong learning, various challenges and issues must be tackled before Malaysia can make significant progress in this educational agenda.

At present, the current uptake and actual status of lifelong learning Malaysia is uncertain, although Guan (2014) reported growth in several areas, e.g.:

- Number of participants in lifelong learning programmes in polytechnics, with a marked increase in the number of part-time learners;
- Number of programmes and participants under the Income Increment Programme managed by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, which focuses on enabling and educating specific target groups (e.g. single mothers, small business owners and cottage industries) to carry out economic activities; and
- Number of participants in the Women Entrepreneurship Programme managed by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, which also focuses on training and education for economic activities.

He also noted that the Government, through the Department of Community College Education, has regularly organised the Malaysia Lifelong Learning (My3L) Carnival in the past three years as an attempt to raise public awareness of the national lifelong learning agenda. These positive developments can be linked to the Blueprint's initiatives, although many others, e.g. establishing a credit bank system, are still works in progress.

In rationalising the need for human capital development, it is useful to highlight that providing for the educational needs of the workforce is often cited as a way to reap economic benefits. In Malaysia, in addition to the Blueprint, human capital development is addressed in the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) – a programme aimed at elevating Malaysia to become a developed nation through 12 national key economic areas (NKEAs); and the New Economic Model (NEM) – a national plan that hopes to double Malaysia's per capita income by building a more competitive, market- and investor-friendly economy. Both ETP and NEM are targeted to achieve their respective goals by 2020.

Although lifelong learning has only recently been addressed as a national agenda, it has had significant connotations for working adults in Malaysia for the last 15 years, especially through ODL institutions like OUM, which was established in 2000 with the specific aim of providing alternative learning pathways for working adults and other individuals who may not have had the opportunity to pursue higher education at earlier points in their lives. The e-learning approach utilised by OUM and other open universities has been a crucial factor to enable working adults to take up programmes on a part-time basis without having to leave their day-jobs. This approach has significant potential to complement the lifelong learning initiatives outlined in the Blueprint.

In December 2014, MOE released a preliminary discussion document for the proposed Malaysia Education Blueprint for Higher Education (see MOE, 2014). This document listed ten ‘Shifts’ that are considered key to elevating the quality and standing of Malaysian higher education. Importantly, the inclusion of the third Shift (“Nation of Lifelong Learners”) signifies a continuation from the Blueprint released in 2011, and seeks to intensify efforts to integrate lifelong learning as part of the Malaysian culture.

Two other Shifts are also relevant to ODL, i.e. Shift 9 (“Global Prominence”) and Shift 10 (“Globalised Online Learning”). Achieving global prominence is a considerable focus in Malaysian higher education, and can be supported through cross-border provision through ODL, which also demonstrates ODL’s potential for contributing to global human capital development. On the other hand, the increasingly important concept of online learning concerns leveraging on the Internet to deliver education, whether through e-learning or blended learning, to reach an even wider learning audience. In this regard, the flexible approach in e-learning and blended learning is an influential factor in encouraging greater numbers of working adults to take up lifelong learning, ultimately also contributing to human capital development.

III. THE WAY FORWARD FOR MALAYSIA

Foremost in the lifelong learning agenda is the need to translate the initiatives listed in the Blueprint into tangible outcomes and achievements. In this regard, the main undertakings involved are coordinating the involvement of all relevant agencies and stakeholders; identifying need, demand and provision of lifelong learning programmes to reduce overlaps; leveraging on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), which are already in implementation via the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA); optimising industry engagement, especially with regards to hands-on training; as well as leveraging on ODL to widen opportunities for lifelong learning.

At this juncture, it will be an imperative to determine the actual status of lifelong learning uptake and impact in this country. It is only through this exercise that gaps and problems can be identified and mitigated.

Presently, MOE is the main authority in lifelong learning, although as stated earlier, other Ministries are also involved in varying capacities. Both public and private higher education institutions as well as industry members and organisations are involved as well. The key endeavour is to engage and harness the capacities of all education stakeholders, the industry and the private sector in an effective and sustainable manner. Boosting human capital development will entail promoting continued learning among working adults and aligning lifelong learning programmes to suit national goals. Engaging the industry – either through collaborative arrangements for training and skills development or through developing industry-relevant curricula – is crucial to ensure that working adults are sufficiently equipped to contribute to the economy.

RPL and APEL in lifelong learning must be emphasised, as they are an important means not only for recognising non-formal and informal learning as part of the comprehensive approach to education, but also to assess and recognise prior learning and work experiences as part of an individual's learning portfolio. RPL and APEL, as well as the open entry (OE) system, have been developed by MQA and are currently applied at several higher education institutions in Malaysia, including OUM, which have enabled a significant number of working adults to obtain higher qualifications by leveraging on their prior learning and experiences – a development that mirrors that of several advanced countries, e.g. South Korea and Denmark. OUM's own approach to OE (called Flexible Entry or FE) has been in effect in 2006 and we are the first institution in Malaysia to create an alternative pathway for individuals to obtain Diplomas, Bachelor's or Master's Degrees through less stringent entry requirements.

The role ODL plays in lifelong learning is unique and should be recognised. As iterated earlier, ODL has enabled many working adults to take up their studies on a part-time basis. The blended pedagogy employed by ODL institutions allows them to plan their study schedules to suit their own lifestyles while juggling personal, family and career obligations. The accessibility, affordability and flexibility offered via ODL have made a positive impact on the democratisation of education in Malaysia. Accessibility concerns how ODL institutions often cater to various geographical locations by leveraging on online platforms; ODL programmes are affordable because they often do not incur additional living costs, nor do they require learners to relocate to physical campuses; and flexibility is reflected in the e-learning or blended learning approach that allows and even encourages learners to study in their own time and at their own

convenience. All three advantages have made higher education a possibility for an unprecedented number of people, regardless of age, creed, gender or location.

Since OUM first opened our doors in 2001, more than 140,000 learners have enrolled into our programmes, with close to 95% of them representing the working adult population. To date, more than 57,000 have successfully graduated in various career-oriented fields, e.g. Business Administration, Information Technology, Occupational Health and Safety Management, and Nursing Science. OUM has also been involved in a special initiative under MOE to upgrade in-service teachers, of whom more than 52,000 have enrolled and about 35,000 have graduated thus far. Similar arrangements have also been reported by other open universities, including Wawasan Open University and Asia e University in Malaysia, as well as internationally at Universitas Terbuka Indonesia and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.

Professional development through non-formal courses and career certification is also part of the repertoire of many open universities and is growing into a crucial component in human capital development in many developing countries including Malaysia. OUM has given focus to this area of lifelong learning through two of its sister institutions, i.e. the Institute of Professional Development (IPD) and School of Lifelong Learning (SoLL). Both IPD and SoLL collaborate with industry partners and organisations to develop modular training and development programmes in various non-formal and informal subject matters, e.g. Retail Management, Plantation Management, Corporate Sales and Marketing, Health and Nutrition, and Photography. This focus on industry-relevance and non-formal learning has considerable impact on the effort to mould well-rounded human capital with the skills, knowledge, competencies and ability to innovate in an increasingly competitive labour landscape.

In light of positive growth in Internet penetration and general technological awareness and aptitude, innovations in educational technology (especially online learning) can also prove to be a useful factor to boost lifelong learning efforts in Malaysia. Online learning can encourage even greater numbers of people to take up lifelong learning, either through ODL courses and programmes, online platforms, or massive open online courses (MOOCs). OUM as well as several other local higher education institutions have recently embarked on MOOCs initiatives that can hopefully lead to significant developments in online learning in this country.

Finally, it will be to the advantage of the entire nation if we could apply useful and viable lessons from successful global examples in lifelong learning. South Korea's Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS), Denmark's approach to liberal adult education, and the open qualifications system employed by the Open University United Kingdom (OUUK) are the examples that will be described in this paper.

Plans for establishing a national Credit Bank System (CBS) have already been preliminarily announced by MOE (see MOE, 2014), which makes highlighting South Korea's ACBS all the more relevant for Malaysia. Its establishment in 1997 to inculcate a national lifelong learning culture by awarding credits for non-formal and informal learning has proven to be especially successful. ACBS documents and recognises outcomes from various learning activities as a form of granting credits and confers degrees when certain numbers of credits are accumulated (Choi, 2008). Just over 40,000 ACBS-registered learners in 2005, but this figure quickly climbed to more than 120,000 in 2011. About 25,000 South Koreans received ACBS qualifications in 2005, and this figure grew to more than 52,000 in 2011 (figures from Usher, 2014). By formally recognising the importance of all forms of learning, ACBS demonstrates that such a system can have considerable impact in a national lifelong learning agenda.

Denmark's unique take on lifelong learning warrants highlight as well. Similar to many other countries, Denmark stresses on adult and continuing education and on-the-job competence development as important components for developing an educated and competent workforce (Ministry of Education Denmark, 2010). However, Denmark is exemplary in lifelong learning due to the long-standing established practice to provide for employee competence development and education planning throughout their careers; the focus on a coherent pathway that emphasises continuance from pre-school to adult education and continuing training; and the clear link between lifelong learning and employment opportunities. The link between on-the-job training and industry needs is clearly indicated as well – Denmark adopts a systematic approach that involves investment from companies that must contribute to upskilling of individuals that can directly strengthen industry development.

The open qualifications system used by the OUUK is a valuable example as well, especially for ODL institutions like OUM. It allows individuals to freely choose courses to suit their interests and needs. These individuals can then complete specific numbers of credit hours to obtain open qualifications at different levels, i.e. Bachelor's degrees (360 credit hours); diplomas (240

credit hours); and certificates (120 credit hours), while also leveraging on RPL and APEL for credit transfer purposes (OUUK, n.d.). If developed in tandem with a CBS, this arrangement has considerable potential impact on the lifelong learning structure in Malaysia, as it will allow for an unprecedented number of individuals to take part in lifelong learning, receive recognition for their studies and create an open and flexible learning pathway at different levels of study.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The focus on human capital development in an increasingly competitive global economic environment is not exclusive to Malaysia alone. Many other countries have expressed the same concern, especially within recent times and as a reaction to the concept of knowledge-based economies and the need to create a knowledgeable, skilful and competent workforce. Malaysia is unique in that human capital development is contingent on three pillars that include lifelong learning. This particularly concerns the lifelong learning activities of working adults – individuals whose knowledge, skills and competencies have the greatest potential to contribute to economic progress and national development.

The unveiling of the Blueprint at the end of 2011 signifies an important turning point in Malaysian education, although at present, the actual status of lifelong learning needs to be properly determined. At the same time, many issues still hamper the lifelong learning agenda and Malaysia must find the means to overcome them in order to ensure the success and positive impact of the Blueprint.

However, there are many opportunities for improvement that can determine success in this agenda. The global examples cited here are just several highlights that can provide useful lessons for Malaysia's move forward. ODL, educational technology, RPL, APEL and the OE system, as well as professional development courses all have benefits and advantages that can also contribute the Blueprint initiatives.

Ultimately, the success of Malaysia's national lifelong learning agenda will depend on the engagement and contribution of all education stakeholders in the country. The concerted efforts of all relevant parties are undeniably crucial if we are to see concrete outcomes from the Blueprint that can make a positive impact on human capital development in Malaysia.

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¹ The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia is no longer a designated ministry. It has now been consolidated as the Department of Higher Education under the purview of the Ministry of Education Malaysia.