

Enculturation of Lifelong Learning: Perspectives from the New Economic Model

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Abstract

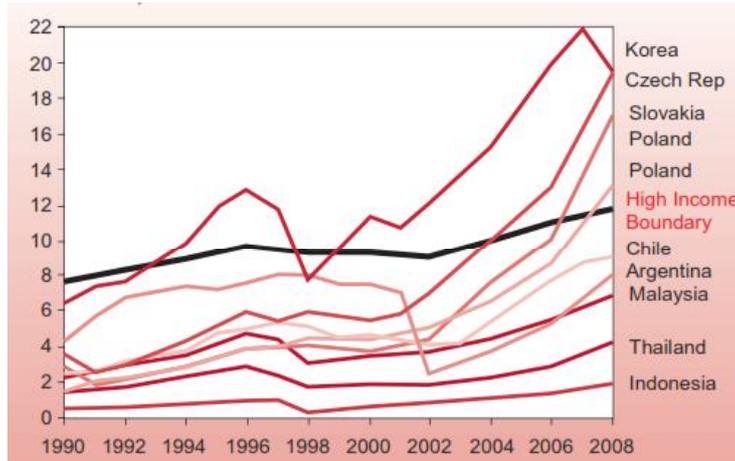
Malaysia as a developing country has been in the middle-income trap since 1990s. Although Malaysia has enjoyed strong growth in the past but its momentum has been significantly slower since the 1997 Asian economic crisis. For the country to become a high-income nation by 2020, Malaysia needs to have a critical mass of skilled and knowledge-based workers for higher productivity and economic growth. The projected national population for age-group cohort 15 years old and above are approximately 34.2 million by year 2020 and they constitute the working population of Malaysia. In strategising and targeting skilled and knowledge-based workforce for the new decade, lifelong learning (LLL) is an important agenda in the 10th Malaysia Plan (10MP) and recognised as the third pillar of human capital development. 10MP has succinctly mentioned that for the country to develop and retain a first-world talent base, LLL will play an important role in upgrading the skills and capabilities of the existing workforce. This paper will delve into the various LLL initiatives by the Ministry of Higher Education in its strategic contributions towards achieving the nation's high-income objective.

Introduction

Malaysia has enjoyed strong growth in the past and in 1992, it attained the upper middle income status. However, since then, Malaysia has been caught in the middle-income trap for quite some time and its position as the economic leader in the region remains an uphill challenge for the country as a whole (Figure 1). Evidence shows that the proportion of high-skilled vis-à-vis low-skilled manpower is declining, productivity is falling and insufficient innovation and creativity efforts has been clearly lacking in the nations labour force (NEM, 2010).

Urgent and concrete measures need to be undertaken to pull the country out of its economic conundrum. Recognising this, the present government has crafted a framework in the form of a New Economic Model

(NEM) comprising of four pillars to drive the economy back on the required momentum. These pillars are (1) 1 Malaysia: People First Performance Now, (2) Government Transformation Programme (GTP), (3) Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) and (4) 10th Malaysia Plan (10MP) (Figure 2). The goals of NEM are expressed in three dimensions, namely high-income, inclusiveness and sustainability (Figure 3). While introducing bold and radical measures in each of the above pillars, NEM continues to focus on the human dimension of development addressing poverty and income disparity which are still prevalent in certain sections and regions of the country's population.



Source: Nationmaster, UN, World Bank (extracted from NEM, 2010, page 6)

Figure 1: GNI per capita of selected countries (USD thousand)

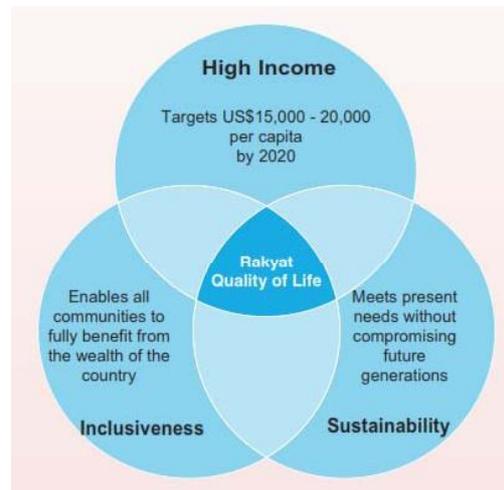


Source: New Economic Model, 2010, page 3

Figure 2: The four pillars for national transformation

For the country to become a high-income nation by 2020, Malaysia needs to have a critical mass of skilled and knowledge-based workers to drive higher productivity and economic growth. It has to face the twin threats of no longer being able to compete with the low-cost emerging economies and at the same

time not able to be on par with the developed countries of high innovation (Kenanga Research, 2010). In this regard, the government lays down the guiding principles for higher education to move the country forward and provide the required human capital in line with the long-term development agenda of the country.



Source: New Economic Model, 2010, page 4

Figure 3: Goals of the new economic model

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has fully recognised the crucial role of higher education in the development of world-class human resources. In its National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) (2007-2020), National Higher Education Action Plan (NHEAP) (2007-2010) and National Higher Education Action Plan Phase 2 (NHEAP2) (2011-2015), MOHE has intensified its efforts towards strengthening the quality and competitiveness of higher education in the country.

This paper will delve into MOHE's various LLL initiatives in its strategic contributions towards achieving the nation's high-income objective.

Lifelong Learning @ MOHE

Currently, lifelong learning initiatives are carried out by various Ministries as well as agencies in the country. MOHE on its part, places great importance in lifelong learning initiatives. In its NHESP, the sixth thrust of the strategic plan is the *enculturation of lifelong learning* which is basically democratising education so that everyone can participate in education to acquire relevant skills, competencies and knowledge via formal and informal education (NHESP, 2007).

There are five categories of institutions under MOHE and they are community colleges, polytechnics, public universities, private universities and university colleges and private colleges. As of December 2010, there are 70 community colleges including their branch campuses, 30 polytechnics, 20 public universities, 47 private universities and university colleges including five foreign universities branch campuses and 392 private colleges (MOHE statistics, 2010).

Community Colleges

In February 2007, the Honorable Prime Minister of Malaysia launched the transformation programme of Community Colleges by rebranding it as the hub for LLL and since then, the expansion of Community Colleges has been phenomenal. From a mere intake of 1,000 students when the Community Colleges was first established in 2001, the enrolment in Community colleges now stands at more than 15,000 students attending full-time courses. Community Colleges continue to grow at a rapid pace and served more than 120,000 adults attending short courses in various disciplines such as floral arrangement, ferro- cement projects, curtain sewing, bakery as well as culinary arts and religious studies (MOHE Statistics, 2010).

The number of participants in Community Colleges has increased significantly within a short span of time, thus reflecting the success and demand of the community for courses provided by these colleges. Now, modular courses are offered to the community based on their needs and demands and in this regard, Community Colleges have provided a wider opportunity and access to tertiary education as well as skills training to the general public.

Polytechnics

The Polytechnics in Malaysia offers an equally wide array of LLL courses for adult and part-time learners. LLL programmemes in Polytechnics are basically clustered into several types of courses. The short courses cater to working adults. The duration of these courses is normally not more than 3 months and conducted in a flexible mode after working hours or during weekends. Their aim is to improve the quality of life of the participants by equipping them with the further skills and knowledge in their present jobs. As in 2010, there are about 6,070 students who enrolled in these short courses programmes in Polytechnics.

In addition, Polytechnics also offer tailor-made LLL programmes for industries and private sectors to meet the latter's manpower requirements. Polytechnic provides training and up-skilling courses for employees in certain industries so that their technicians and middle management personnel can further enhance their knowledge and skills in their work place. There are about 2,400 students currently enrolled in the tailored LLL programmes for industries in various Polytechnics throughout the country.

Another category of LLL programmes offered by Polytechnics is upgrading courses on a part-time basis for graduates who are already employed but are attending classes during weekends. The objective is to enable students to achieve a higher qualification, such as students with a certificate qualification working towards a diploma or higher level qualifications, mainly in technology courses. As of December 2010, there are about 2,000 students undergoing such programmes.

Public Universities

As for the public universities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is the pioneer university in the country in offering distance education programmes. Its School of Distance Education (SDE) was established in 1971 to provide opportunities for working adults to obtain tertiary education. Through this innovative education approaches, working adults are able to undertake undergraduate courses while remaining in full-time employment.

Other public universities also partake LLL programmes by offering executive programmes at degree, diploma or certificate levels for full time working adults and the total LLL enrolment to date is about 15,800 students at various levels of studies (CAPs PSH, 2011).

Open and Distance Learning Universities

Starting from year 2000, pioneered by the establishment of Open University Malaysia (OUM), open and distance learning (ODL) universities are becoming popular providers of university education to working adults. OUM has grown in leaps and bounds and by mid-2011, has provided education to more than 100,000 students. Likewise, the Wawasan Open University (WOU) established in 2007 has expanded rapidly from a few hundred to about 6,000 students and Asia e-University (AeU), the latest addition to LLL providers, has about 1,000 students. These ODL institutions continue to register healthy growth in terms of student enrolment because through the flexibility of their programmes, they provide wider opportunities and access to higher education to those who missed the opportunity to participate in tertiary education during their formal years of education for one reason or another. This second chance in life for working adults to acquire higher education qualifications are very well received by the Malaysian public.

Initiatives Undertaken by MOHE in Moving LLL Agenda in the country

MOHE has a major role to play in ensuring the success of the transformation and development of quality human capital through the development of skilled and knowledgeable human capital. The strategies, plans, programmes and policies of MOHE are directed towards raising knowledgeable human capital for the country in line with the national mission and vision. MOHE is aware of the constant changes revolving around the higher education system and strives to adopt, adapt and develop the best practices to be at par with world class higher education providers.

MOHE endeavours to lead the nation and plays its role effectively to transform Malaysia into a high income nation through the development of skilled, knowledgeable and innovative human capital. This need has translated in MOHE greater emphasis on lifelong learning programmes.

Significant initiatives have been undertaken by MOHE to enculturate LLL programmes among the people in the country (both young and old) and these are complementary and in tandem with the aspiration to build a world-class higher education system and produce knowledgeable human capital for an innovation-led development in Malaysia. Among the initiatives are:

The Formulation of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2007-2020:

The NHESP consists of seven strategic thrusts will provide the impetus for attaining excellence in higher education. These strategic thrusts are:

1. Widening access and increasing equity;
2. Improving the quality of teaching and learning;

3. Enhancing research and innovation;
4. Strengthening of higher education institutions;
5. Intensifying internationalisation;
6. Enculturation of lifelong learning; and
7. Reinforcing the delivery systems of the MOHE

There are four phases in the implementation of NHESP:

1. Phase 1 (2007 - 2010): Placement Basis
2. Phase 2 (2011 - 2015): Improvement and Empowerment
3. Phase 3 (2016 - 2020): Excellence
4. Phase 4 (beyond 2020): Sustainability

Under the first phase (2007-2010) of implementation, MOHE identified 23 critical agenda projects (CAPs) which are implemented and monitored by a dedicated unit known as the Programme Management Office (PMO) at the Ministry (NHEAP, 2007-2010). They are:

1. Governance
2. Leadership
3. Academia
4. Learning and Teaching
5. Research and Development
6. Internationalisation
7. Industry-Academia
8. Graduate Employability
9. Private Higher Education Institutions
10. Holistic Development of Students
11. Quality Assurance
12. Transformation of Polytechnics
13. Accessibility and Sustainability
14. MyBrain
15. Driving Programme Towards Excellence (APEX)
16. e-Learning
17. MOHE Delivery System
18. Lifelong Learning
19. Top Business School

20. Centre of Excellence
21. Entrepreneurship
22. Transformation of Community Colleges
23. Knowledge Transfer Programme

Currently, MOHE is implementing the second phase of the Plan (NHEAP, Phase 2, 2011-2015).

The Blueprint on Enculturation of LLL (2011-2020)

MOHE has rightfully placed LLL agenda as its sixth strategic thrust in the NHESP and noted that LLL through distance learning, e-learning, workplace and part-time learning will become an integral entity to support Malaysia's human capital development and the nation's knowledge and innovation-based economy (MOHE, 2007).

To implement the lifelong learning agenda of the country and to assist the government in transforming the nation into a high income economy by 2020, MOHE has taken the initiative to embark on a Blueprint on Enculturation of LLL for Malaysia: 2011-2020.

To realise the full potential of LLL for Malaysia, the Blueprint aims to address the following issues and challenges:

1. Absence of a full-fledged lifelong learning policy;
2. Lack of monitoring of LLL programme at the national level;
3. Lack of awareness and participation in LLL programmes;
4. Inadequate financial support for lifelong learners;
5. Inadequate mechanism and infrastructure for effective implementation of LLL programmes;
6. Overlapping LLL activities programmes; and
7. Recognition.

The Blueprint adopts the four strategies as prescribed in NHESP as follows:

1. Strengthening of the mechanism and initiatives of LLL through the establishment of the National LLL Committee to formulate policy and provide an enabling environment to move LLL agenda for the country as a whole;
2. Providing awareness and promotional LLL programmes to the general public through catchy jingles or tagline and enticing the general population via incentives and funding mechanism;
3. Ensuring sustainability of LLL programmes via appropriate recognition and accreditation which include recognition of prior learning experience, quality assurance and establishment of credit bank for LLL programmes; and
4. Providing strong support learning system to encourage individuals to participate LLL programmes.

At the level of implementation, the Blueprint provides a list of initiatives with their performance objectives, performance and accountability metrics (or KPIs), strategic targets, sponsoring organisations and budget allocations.

The strategic objectives, KPIs and targets as well as the operational definition of the LLL CAPs were derived through numerous workshops, discussions and meetings. The LLL concepts and policy direction were deliberated intensively at these workshops and consultations with all the stakeholders in order to arrive at a common understanding and acceptance of LLL to be implemented by the community colleges, polytechnics, public universities and private universities mainly through the ODL institutions.

The Blueprint recommended that all LLL initiatives are to be governed by the following principles:

1. Enculturation of LLL is a national agenda and to be the third pillar of human capital development;
2. Maximum impact and complementarity;
3. Cost effectiveness;
4. Accountability;
5. Creativity and innovation;
6. Leveraging on technology; and
7. Benchmarking with international best practices.

Like the school and tertiary education, LLL should be in the mainstream of Malaysia's education system of the country, thus becoming the "Third Pillar" of human capital development of the country. In this regard, the 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 or skills*". This definition is adopted to provide the much needed focus on upgrading and upskilling the education and skills level of working adults in line with the country's aspiration to be a high income economy by 2020.

Among the initiatives recommended by the Blueprint is the setting up of a National LLL Committee (NLC) to provide the policy guidelines on LLL at the national level. NLC is assisted by a Technical Committee that will oversee and monitor the implementation of the various LLL initiatives and programmes. For the purpose of executing the action plans listed under each of the LLL strategies, another level of working committees is set up to focus on the following:

1. Coordinating and Strengthening of LLL Programmes;
2. Accreditation of Prior Learning Experience and LLL Credit Bank System;
3. LLL Database Development and Management;
4. Funding Mechanisms; and
5. Promotion and Awareness Campaigns and Promotions.

For ease of implementation and monitoring, all LLL programmes are divided into 4 clusters, namely;

1. Programmes that are academic in nature such as online certificate, diploma and degree programmes conducted on a part-time basis including online e-learning programmes;
2. Programmes that are based on technical education and vocational training such as the modular courses offered in Community Colleges;
3. Programmes that are aimed to increase the knowledge and skills of individuals in their daily life such as language, sewing and cooking classes; and
4. In-service training programmes for officers and staff of the respective ministries as well as in the private sectors. Such in-service training courses are normally mandatory as part of the effort to raise the standards and quality of civil service and private sector employees.

The LLL Blueprint was approved in principle by the Cabinet Committee on Human Capital Development chaired by the Right Honourable Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia on 20 August 2010.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Higher Education has a major role to play in ensuring the success of the transformation and the development of quality human capital of Malaysia. Therefore, all the strategies, plans, programmes and policies of MOHE are directed towards enhancing human capital development of the country in line with the national mission and vision. Given the highly competitive global environment, MOHE is fully aware of the constant changes revolving around the higher education system and strive to adopt, adapt and develop the best practices to be at par with the world's best in this arena.

Through its initiatives, MOHE adopts an integrated human capital and talent development framework through the provision of quality education at all levels, including adult education. Now that LLL has been recognised as the third pillar of the country's human capital development, the national framework will promote and encourage adult learners in Malaysia to continue to learn throughout their lives. The Blueprint on Enculturation of LLL for Malaysia 2011-2020 strengthens the nation's LLL agenda and provides more LLL opportunities to its citizens to raise their overall living standards. The Blueprint provides the much needed roadmap for an effective transformation of the nation's human capital.

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