

White Coffin comes alive

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Comment

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MANY still recall The White Coffin Project initiated by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) students a few years ago.

This modest effort to champion sustainability met with unexpected public endorsement and took the local media by storm.

Many campuses in Malaysia and abroad followed USM's lead and became polystyrene-free as well.

USM was recognised for its efforts at the Healthy Cities Alliance Conference in Japan and received the Award for Creative Developments in Healthy Cities for its innovative initiative.

It is an honour to be recognised by an international community concerned with protecting the environment.

Recently, USM was also honoured by the Global University Network on Innovation (GUNI).

An email from GUNI reads: "We are pleased to inform you that the GUNI Universities and Social Commitment Observatory has incorporated the White Coffin Student Activism Programme as a good practice."



USM students recently co-organised a seminar entitled **The Corporate Social Responsibility Efforts by a University for the Environment**

The Universities and Social Commitment Observatory aims to identify, disseminate and transfer higher education experiences linked to the social commitment of higher educational institutions.

GUNI uses this platform to contribute to discussions on, and the study of, the challenges currently facing universities, and to enable the Observatory to be a useful, active and dynamic space for effectively transferring experiences and knowledge.

It facilitates access to resources, experiences and debates on the role of higher education in modern society. The perspective is both global and local.

The White Coffin Project is accepted as one of the resources and experiences under the title The White Coffin Student Environmentalism Activism.

GUNI noted: "USM has been at the forefront of student-driven and university administration-supported ways to reduce the ecological footprint left by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

"The White Coffin Student Environmental Activism is a representation of how ... (it) can force HEIs campus management into a more sustainable operational template."

GUNI highlighted "the novel idea of referring to the polystyrene food container as a 'white coffin', alluding to how... (their) common overuse... in modern society leads to the 'death' of the planet as we know it".

It then recounted how the idea was mooted on Dec 18, 2007. The campaign lasted until Jan 4, 2008 with the target of zero polystyrene at campus canteens by Jan 1 of that year (as agreed with the canteen operators).

On Jan 7, 2008, the vice-Chancellor called a Press conference to announce the success of the project.

Since then, there have been sustained efforts by the mass media to publish and maintain public interest in the issue.

Numerous student groups have been inspired to incorporate the White Coffin ideals in their activities; either to create greater awareness of the need to be green or adopt green practices.

USM students have also proposed the idea to universities in Hong Kong and Japan, as well as primary and secondary schools in Malaysia.

Private companies such as Dell and Motorola have also shown interest in adopting the campaign for their staff and families.

The White Coffin has become a flagship for student environmental activism on USM campuses.

It is expected to evolve into something bigger as the university pursues its sustainable campus agenda to reduce waste and consumption.

GUNI concludes: "The people-centred approach must be adopted for successful implementation of programmes to achieve sustainable development.

"Unilateral actions from the top-down have proven to be less effective. Every person must be imbued with sustainability principles and values, and this can only be achieved if we provide each one with the skill sets to live sustainably."

Congratulations to USM students for setting a fine example internationally.

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