

Re-Igniting Awareness of Local Folklore through Community Engagement: A Collaborative Effort of USM, UiTM and WOU

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Traditionally, institutions of higher learning have always been seen as the source of new knowledge where solutions to complex problems are debated and unravelled. In response to the global trend where knowledge has become a commodity, higher education institutions are also evolving into a pre-eminent catalyst of societal change. In the race to expand and restructure higher education systems to be of world-class quality, it is important that the role of the university as the conscience of society is not forsaken. It has been argued that no institution can rival the universities' potential to transform society because universities alone exist solely to produce and disseminate knowledge (Crow, 2005).

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Community engagement is now the main agenda of many socially responsive and engaged universities because public service is now viewed as one of the fundamental objectives of a university (Zipsane, 2011). Local and regional community engagement is a rapidly expanding activity in Malaysian universities. Globally, it is increasingly seen as part of the universal quality assurance assessment process of any institution of higher learning (Garlick & Langworthy, 2008). Admittedly, the obligation to attend to society needs and developing a community engaged university is part and parcel of the social contract of a higher education. In making time for civic responsibility, universities acknowledge the importance of fostering positive relationships with their local communities. Societal commitment should take precedence

and the relevance of any knowledge should be in tandem with societal needs and rooted in ethics and values.

It is with this aspiration in mind that three local universities embarked on a collaborative effort to increase the cultural link and inter-relationships between universities and the local community. Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA and Wawasan Open University joined forces to work together bridging ethnicities, cultures and traditions through an effort to re-ignite awareness of the local cultural tradition. This project was funded by the Division of Industry and Community Networking, Universiti Sains Malaysia. As part of the initiative, a workshop on local folklore entitled *Bengkel Tradisi Rakyat: Merai dan Memulihara Tradisi Rakyat Pulau Pinang* was held. It coincided with the launching of a blog: <http://www.tradisirakyat.com/> that acts as a platform for Penangites to contribute towards the documentation of their local tradition.

This endeavour has brought together communities and denizens of higher institutions in an effort to impart the importance of conserving and preserving local culture for future generations. In addition, to facilitate meaningful connections between the task group and the local communities, the project managed to encourage active participations of many local cultural organisations in Penang. This was attained by providing them a platform to exhibit their cultural heritage during the workshop and take into account their views and experiences through a participatory dialogues between them and the universities.

A small scale study had been conducted during the workshop to measure the impact of the cultural awareness efforts on the participants. A set of questionnaire was administered during the workshop to enquire the participants' level of awareness on the tradition the Penang's multiracial community before and after the workshop. The questionnaire consists of three sections: the participants' demographic background, the participants' awareness level before attending the workshop and the participants' level of awareness post-workshop.

35 participants from various ethnic backgrounds and professions participated in the study. Out of the 35 respondents, 25 (71.4 per cent) of them were female. Majority of them were within the age range of between 30 to 39 years old and one respondent was 70 years old. Fourty per cent of the respondents came from the education field while 31.5 per cent of them were from the servicing sectors. The

respondents also included 11.5 per cent students and six per cent cultural activists while the remainder was made up of local business owners and members of NGOs. The ethnic make up of the respondents were 86 per cent Malay, 11.5 per cent Chinese and 2.5 per cent Indian Hindus. Fourty per cent of the respondents originated from Penang, while the rest migrated to Penang due to work and studies.

“The potential of synergy between the universities’ efforts and the expressed needs of the respondents for a concerted effort by the universities, cultural activists, cultural organisations and the local community to preserve their cultural tradition may effectively be a central part of nation building embodied in the concept of 1Malaysia social cohesion.”

Based on the empirical data, 58 per cent of the respondents agreed that before attending the workshop, their knowledge and understanding about the Penang culture was quite limited. About 60 per cent of the respondents claimed that they were previously less interested to know about Penang culture besides never ever attending any cultural workshop. Nevertheless, 94 per cent of them felt that there was a need to learn and educate themselves about the extensive and distinctive culture of a myriad of ethnic and religious groups in Penang. Most significantly, a majority of them (94 per cent) agreed that it was vital to preserve and sustain the cultural heritage of the Penangites, hasten by what they perceived as threats of a globalised culture. It was strongly put across that they felt that their culture was essentially their identity, therefore the preservation of that identity was crucial.

Feedbacks obtained from the same set of respondents indicate that 97 per cent of them expressed agreement that their knowledge and understanding about the Penang culture had reached a new depth after attending the workshop. All of them claimed that their interest to be acquainted with various facets of Penang tradition increased notably and they were looking forward to participate in more cultural seminars and workshops. The respondents believed that more rigorous and sustainable efforts by higher educational institutions should be put in action to preserve the tradition of the Penangites. The respondents also expressed an urgent need for more workshops that engage the community to actively participate in cultural preservation.

Conclusion

Based on this small scale study, one can deduce that the three universities’ efforts to increase cultural awareness through community engagement efforts and institutional collaboration has resulted in meaningful and purposeful impact on matters close to the heart of the community. The potential of synergy between the universities’ efforts and the expressed needs of the respondents for a concerted effort by the universities, cultural activists, cultural organisations and the local community to preserve their cultural tradition may effectively be a central part of nation building embodied in the concept of 1Malaysia social cohesion.

Reference

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Seminar on the Integration of the Madrasah Institution into the Cambodian National Education System: Sharing Malaysian Experience

Reported by Bahrulmazi Edrak, UCTI

The seminar on the “Integration of the Madrasah Institution into the Cambodian National Education System: Sharing Malaysian Experience” was jointly organised by the Asia Pacific University College of Technology and Innovation (UCTI) and the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). The National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN) acted as the secretariat for the series of strategic dialogue between the countries of Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Myanmar and Vietnam, i.e. CLMV. The seminar was the outcome of a research project headed by Y.Bhg. Datuk Mohd. Yusof Kasim (UCTI) and involved a group of researchers made up of lecturers from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), UCTI and the Cambodian Islamic Welfare Association. A total of 20 mudirs from Cambodia were invited to be participants of the seminar. The seminar was also attended by HE Ou Eng, the Head Director of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth of Cambodia. Two officers and two cameramen from Apsara television, the Cambodian government owned television station covered the seminar. The seminar was officiated by the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Malaysian Embassy, Y.M. Raja Saifful Ridwan.

Cambodia was chosen as the initial starting point of the project. Similar subsequent projects will be carried out in other selected countries such as Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam, Timor Leste, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea and Southern Philippines. The project, at a later phase, will also include less developed countries in Africa.

The main objective of this seminar was to share Malaysia’s experience with the participants and representatives from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth of Cambodia in modernising its Islamic school system, and strengthening and increasing networking between ministries, universities, non government organisations (NGOs), Islamic schools and the communities of Malaysia and Cambodia. The seminar

also aims at identifying possible integration programmes to be implemented at the Islamic schools, suggesting suitable community approaches between Malaysian universities and the Islamic schools in Cambodia, and drafting the CLMV Master Plan for Community Engagement and Student Exchange 2011 for the Department of Higher Education.

The seminar started off with a paper presentation by the Malaysian researchers and roundtable discussion between the researchers and Cambodian participants from the Islamic schools. Deliberation of the seminar was aired in the news broadcast of Apsara Television, Cambodia. As a result of the roundtable discussion, the secretariat concluded a few items that could be implemented by the MoHE and Malaysian government. Among those items were the need to regularise and standardise the syllabus of Islamic schools, identify sample reference books and book aids for modernising programmes, identify the university fields in which the students of Islamic schools may further their studies, and implement training programmes for teachers in Cambodia with a focus on effective learning and teaching techniques through short courses. The commitment in assisting the Islamic schools in Cambodia by Malaysia was underlined by the Malaysian embassy in Cambodia initiative to include the activities in modernising the Islamic schools as part of their key performance indicators (KPIs).

The Malaysian delegation also visited a few Islamic schools and villages in the area of Phnom Penh to observe current practices particularly with regard to learning methods. An interview with imams, heads of village, residents and students was conducted to gather further information on the Islamic school system in Cambodia. The visit was very helpful in drafting a suitable action plan based on the social background of the Islamic society in Cambodia. The researchers have prepared a comprehensive report for the Ministry of Higher Education consisting of recommendations

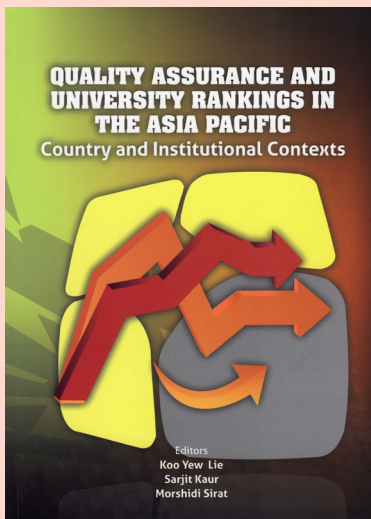
and proposals on developing and modernising the Islamic schools in Cambodia.

This initial phase is anticipated to be a reference in developing future undertakings of similar projects. In the long run, it is envisioned that minority groups in the CLMV countries would be able to further their studies in either the universities in Cambodia or Malaysia.



Participants of the seminar.

Quality Assurance and University Rankings in the Asia Pacific Country and Institutional Contexts



University league tables at national, regional, international levels are increasingly complex, influential and controversial. In spite of criticisms on robustness of methodology and bias of indicators, higher education institutions continue to have an appetite for them and use or misuse them in their planning, policymaking and promotion activities. This publication will contribute to the much needed analysis of the implications, benefits and unintended consequences related to rankings and the broader issues of quality assurance in the Asia Pacific region.

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Wolfe, R. N. and Johnson, S. D. (1995). Personality as a predictor of college performance. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, Vol. 2, 177-185.

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