CONTENTS

Transforming Communities in ASEAN: Efforts by Malaysia's Global Reach Programme

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Introduction

*T*he Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed on 8th August 1967 as an alliance in promoting economic and political cooperation as well as regional stability (ASEAN, 2014). The objectives of ASEAN establishment are to accelerate the economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the Southeast Asia region, as well as to promote regional peace and stability, active collaboration, and mutual assistance of common interests among the members (ASEAN, 2014).

In line with the objectives, the 'ASEAN Community[1]' was established in 2007 as a shared vision for the Southeast Asian nations to look outward and to live in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies (Billah, 2014). The 'ASEAN Community' vision aimed to enhance people-to-people relations and expand existing markets in the region (Azim, 2014). The vision is to be realised by 2015 in order to provide a new arena for the circulation of capital from international capitalism and acts as a new social platform for the Southeast Asian communities (Wirasenjaya & Herningtyas, 2013).

Achieving such vision, however, is not an easy ride. As Severino (2006) stated, "building a genuine ASEAN Community is a difficult, long term endeavor" (p.250). There are diverse challenges in establishing the 'ASEAN Community' as well as concerns on its implications for all involving Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN can only move forward if the people and citizens of the ten member countries support and help each other. It is therefore important to build an effective mechanisms to bridge the regional communication gap and support such collaborative efforts among the regional community.

The aim of this paper is to share Malaysia's experiences in contributing towards ASEAN development through her global reach higher education programme. Challenges and way forward for Malaysia to champion its global reach programme are also discussed.

Malaysia's Higher Education and Global Engagement

Malaysia has a new leadership role in ASEAN from 2015 when the association becomes a community. This has called for urgent needs for the country to relook at how integrated efforts for ASEAN development can be facilitated through regional community engagement. To date, Malaysia has made several significant contributions which reaffirms its commitment as a responsible member of the international community, particularly among Muslim countries as well as other neighbouring Asian countries. Mutual

sharing and the exchanging of knowledge are seen as an effective mechanism for Malaysia to facilitate the countries to strive together in a competitive global platform. Higher education is seen as one of the key actors in directing Malaysia to realise her national transformation towards the Vision 2020. The capability of higher education in changing and transforming the regional economic structure, shaping the values and norms of a society, as well as influencing a nation's politics have long been evident in past and current times (Abdul Razak et al., 2011).

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The landscape of Malaysia's higher education system places a lot of emphasis on internationalisation whereby the government seeks to set a new benchmark in the development of human capital by empowering higher education through global engagement. Towards realising the national aspiration through the Higher Education sector, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) was formulated and launched by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2007 to empower higher education for the benefit of national development, as well as to transform the country into an international hub of higher education.

The NHESP consists of several phases of implementation. Phase 1, i.e., NHESP 1, (from 2007 to 2010) focused on building the foundation required for the transformation of higher education in Malaysia. This phase has contributed to enhance the capacity of higher education system in attracting many international students to pursue higher education in Malaysia (Abdul Razak et al., 2011).

Phase 2 (from 2011 to 2015), i.e., NHESP 2, aims to strengthen the base developed previously in Phase 1 as well as to formulate an effective strategy through the use of the soft power approach (Rozinah, 2012). NHESP 2 acts as a guide to develop the agenda of internationalisation initiatives at the regional, international, and global levels (Rozinah, 2012).

Malaysia's Global Reach

"Malaysia's Global Reach" programme was formulated by the Department of Higher Education, MOE which marks a new level of the country's commitment towards regional and international higher education collaborations. In line with the internationalisation agenda of NHESP 2, the programme aims to provide complementing strategies of NHESP 2 in positioning Malaysian higher education on the global map. The NHESP 2 emphasises on a comprehensive

internationalisation effort for a sustainable and transformative development in the Malaysian higher education sector. Internationalisation of the education sector refers to a comprehensive institutional transformation process that aims to integrate international and intercultural dimension (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013).

The aim of "Malaysia's Global Reach" is to position higher education in Malaysia in the hearts of the people of the preferred partner countries (Abdul Razak et al., 2011). Global engagement is seen as an effective mechanism for Malaysia to use her experience in facilitating sustainable and transformative development of the higher education sector, in line with the Prosper-Thy-Neighbour policy to address the developmental gap amongst members of ASEAN countries (Abdul Razak et al., 2011). The programme utilises the soft power approach to develop the trust and confidence of partner countries towards the capability of Malaysia's higher education which is facilitated through several internationalisation activities, such as mobility programs, service learning, and collaboration in education and training (Knight, 2013). According to Abdul Razak et al. (2011), the soft power concept in higher education refers to "the capabilities and intentions of the HEIs to capture the hearts and minds of local and international stakeholders to collectively accept values, ideologies and cultures of learning which can bring benefits to communities" (p.18). The soft power concept includes planning for strategies and actions which can occur via the internalisation agenda as well as implementing the planned projects which requires the provision of physical infrastructure, such as by setting up branches of the HEIs in other countries (Abdul Razak et al., 2011).

The "Malaysia's Global Reach" programme constitutes six clusters that are committed to make paradigm shift in higher education through expert sharing, diplomatic bonding, community exchange, student and institutional fellowship as well as skills and technology transfer among the partner countries. The clusters are as follow:

- *MyExpert*: a cluster on "Strengthening Global Engagement through Knowledge Sharing"

- *MySkill*: a cluster on "Knowledge and Skills Hub Creation through Internationalisation"

- *MyAlumni:* a cluster on "Leveraging on Student Alumni Relations towards Internationalisation"

- *MyFellow*: a cluster on "Enhancing World Presence through Contribution and Reputation"

- *MyOdyssey*: another cluster on "Enhancing World Presence through Contribution and Reputation"

- *MyCommunity*: another cluster on "Enhancing World Presence through Contribution and Reputation"

Selected Contributions of "Malaysia's Global Reach" Programme to ASEAN

The *MyExpert* cluster works on strengthening global engagement through knowledge-sharing programme. The "Prosper-Thy-Neighbour" concept is used to enhance the level of cooperation and collaboration between Malaysia and her preferred partner countries in Southeast Asia. *MyExpert* has charted a number of major achievements through a series of initiatives involving the Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam (CLMV) countries and Indonesia whereby databanks containing a list of activities and experts from Malaysia and those countries who are involved in certain key subject areas have been successfully established. This initiative is a part of the cluster's efforts in facilitating transnational academic collaboration through the establishment of the databanks as referral points for those who seek for collaborative partnership with the ASEAN experts (NaHERI, 2014).

Meanwhile, the *MySkill* cluster is dedicated to bring positive outcomes to the socio-economic growth in the developing nations through the provision of skills training and technology transfer. The cluster is forging itself as a niche in the regional skills training, knowledge transfer, and technology sharing arena (NaHERI, 2014). As an example, the cluster has successfully arranged a series of high-level meetings and discussions with officials and representatives of respective ministries, agencies, and companies on economic and human capital developments of Myanmar. The meetings have managed to put a good extent of urgency for Myanmar to provide training and higher education services in order to fulfil the skill-building needs of the local communities in the country (NaHERI, 2014).

The *MyAlumni* cluster leverages on the expertise of graduates of Malaysian universities and their networks in order to project Malaysian HEIs as purveyors of change and innovation at international level, particularly within CLMV. *MyAlumni* has thus far made giant strides in refurnishing the image and positioning Malaysia as a quality regional education hub. For instance, the cluster has successfully launched the Malaysia Alumni Council as an organisation helmed by experts to plan and implement various initiatives that will enhance Malaysia's role as a regional hub in the transfer of knowledge and expertise through collaborative endeavours in the region (NaHERI, 2014). To date, the cluster has successfully developed a database containing details of international alumni who are linked to 76 HEIs in the CLMV quartet (NaHERI, 2014).

As for *MyFellow*, the cluster acts as a strategic platform to develop diplomatic relationships towards strengthening diplomatic ties and instilling positive feeling about Malaysia. The core objective of *MyFellow* is to foster diplomacy and good will through the promotion of positivism, cooperation, and understanding. The cluster's global engagement initiatives have yielded encouraging outcomes in terms of leadership and cooperation development among youths in the partner countries, including in Southeast Asia. *MyFellow* has successfully conducted the Aceh-Malaysia International Youth Seminar as an effort to connect youths of diverse backgrounds and to develop their leadership capabilities (NaHERI, 2014).

The *MyOdyssey* cluster is dedicated towards showcasing Malaysian higher education programmes on the global stage by highlighting the expertise from Malaysia's tertiary educational institution in the areas of student development, internationalisation, research and development, as well as Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The cluster has successfully organised a roundtable discussion in conjunction with the 9th ASEAN Society TVET Conference in 2013 involving senior managers from participating countries to discuss TVET related issues. As an outcome of the event, a blueprint for the establishment of the International TVET Association of Malaysia to serve and advise partner countries has successfully been documented (NaHERI, 2014).

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The sixth cluster, i.e., *MyCommunity* seeks to leverage on the Malaysian community value and engage communities everywhere via the dissemination of knowledge, skills, and expertise (NaHERI, 2014). *MyCommunity* focuses on skills and knowledge development with a view towards empowering communities for a sustainable quality of life (Abdul Razak et al., 2011). *MyCommunity* has made several key achievements in extending its helping hand to other Southeast Asia countries. The cluster has successfully organised the Malaysia-Indonesia University Student Congress in collaboration with Governance Department of Higher Education Agency, Indonesia and MOE. As an outcome of the congress, a steering committee was formed which is tasked to establish a sustainable platform to facilitate inter-university forums and joint student congresses. (NaHERI, 2014).

Challenges and Way Forward

The preceding section presented some of the major contributions of "Malaysia's Global Reach" to ASEAN. However, despite the success of the initiative, it is acknowledged that there are many challenges ahead.

Language proficiency might be a barrier to a successful community engagement within ASEAN as Southeast

Asia comprises multilingual communities from different countries with diverse first languages. Therefore, the main challenge for such global engagement effort is to facilitate better communication.

Another challenge for building community engagement is to work collaboratively through the global community engagement projects and activities. The fact is that, community-building is a long road with many milestones. As highlighted by Cuthill et al. (2014), the process of a collaborative research in community engagement initiatives is not linear since researchers or academics need to work with h many parties in different environments. Community engagement work might face challenges in terms of funding, logistics, as well as anticipated cooperation from various parties.

Other than that, political situations in some of the partnering countries are other barriers to Malaysia's successful effort for global outreach in Southeast Asia. Even though there has been a decline in major conflicts in Southeast Asia today, internal conflicts in areas such as southern Thailand, southern Philippines, and Myanmar remain a serious challenge to community development, especially in the aspect of security (Archarya, 2013). For instance, long political crises in Myanmar and Philippines has led the "Malaysia's Global Reach" pose as obstacles and challenges.

Above all, the ultimate challenge to successful community engagement is to identify what the neighbouring communities really need. Taliaferro (2011) noted that, one of the barriers to community-based research is the failure to consider the voices of the community in addressing their needs. Therefore, community needs analysis should be undertaken in a synergised manner in order to ensure that community engagement initiatives are tailored to the changing needs of the community.

In moving forward, the "Malaysia's Global Reach" programme needs to consider these challenges in building a sustainable platform for regional community engagement. It is recommended that an effective communication channel, such as ASEAN community engagement network, be established to form a sustainable platform for community engagement initiatives in ASEAN; taking into account the diversity of multilingual and multicultural communities in Southeast Asian countries. More initiatives can certainly be implemented by the program in order to contribute to the ASEAN community.

Conclusion

The 'Malaysia's Global Reach' programme demonstrates the country's commitments in extending its assistance to the neighbouring countries and in reaching further for international collaborations through community engagement regionally and globally. Undoubtedly, the efforts are not without challenges. However, with careful planning and implementation, such challenges may be effectively overcome.

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Footnote:
1.   The 'ASEAN Community' is founded on three pillars: political and security community, economic integration, and socio-cultural cooperation.