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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The role of higher education in any country is indeed very important as it acts as a catalyst to foster a harmonious, productive society with robust economic growth. Higher education is of tremendous help to nation building through its ability to generate highly skilled workforce.This paper examines the state of community engagement in Malaysian higher education institutions. Community engagement in this paper refers to the collaboration "between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global)" (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6).

Keywords: Community engagement, higher education, Malaysian higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of higher education in any country is indeed very important as it acts as a catalyst to foster a harmonious, productive society with robust economic growth. Higher education is of tremendous help to nation building through its ability to generate highly skilled workforce. This paper examines the state of community engagement and research & innovation in Malaysian higher education institutions. Community engagement refers to the collaboration "between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global)" (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6). This paper discusses the positions of community engagement and research & innovation within the National Strategic Plan for Higher Education, their implementation at the selected higher educational institutions.

The former Principal of Edinburgh University, Lord Sutherland, writes that in the rapidly changing landscape of higher education, it is pivotal that we properly have a proper understanding of our mission and vision — what it means to be a university? (cited in Badat, 2009). This entails our understanding of the purposes of higher education. Accordingly, Badat identifies three major purposes of HE. First, is the production of knowledge. Second, is dissemination of knowledge and the production of graduates that ideally: "can think effectively and critically"; have "achieved depth in some field of knowledge", and have a "critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves". (cited in Badat , p. 84). Third, is to undertake community engagement.

The third function has been somewhat neglected in comparison to the first two roles of higher education. In view of that, since at least the last decade of the 20th century, conscientious voices have emerged in Europe and North America calling for Higher Education to regain their relevance by being responsive to the society.

2. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Ernest Boyer, the former Chancellor of the State University of New York, and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.* He proposed that the definition of scholarship be expanded to include not only research (the scholarship of discovery) but also the integration of knowledge, teaching and service (Glassick, 2000). Moreover, Boyer contends that American education has moved away from its traditional commitment to public service and argues for a new commitment to service that he calls the scholarship of engagement:

> I am convinced that …the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement… The scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities*...* But at a deeper level, I have this growing conviction that what is needed is not just mere programmes, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of

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direction... Increasingly I am convinced that ultimately, the scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other...enriching the quality of life for all of us.(Boyer, 1996, pp. 19-20)

In view of Boyer's and other scholars' emphases on community engagement, it might be appropriate to properly define the concept.

2.1. Definition

While there are several definitions for community engagement, this study adopts with some modifications the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT) and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst's definitions of the term. In a broad sense, community engagement in this study refers to the collaboration "between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global)" (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6) This process entails "the creation, integration, application and transmission of knowledge for the benefit of external audience and the University" (Sandmann, 2007, p. 2) The term community in this study adopts the definition of the National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement (2001) where it is broadly defined to include "audiences external to the campus that are part of a collaborative process to contribute to the public good" (Cited in Sandmann, 2007, p. 1).

2.2 Community Engagement: The Malaysian Experience

Malaysian universities' relations with community and their attempts to form meaningful relations with community is not a new phenomenon. However, efforts to reach out to community have largely been conducted on an ad hoc basis and lack a coherent and comprehensive policy and direction on community engagement. Consequently, linkages happen mostly through universities' and students' community service programmes, and actions of individual lecturers.

Community engagement as defined by the CFAT is an emerging trend in Malaysian higher education and has yet to be seriously implemented in the country. The first phase of Malaysian Strategic Plan of Higher Education launched in 2007 does not directly mention community engagement as its main agenda. However this does not mean that the Ministry of Higher Education is not concerned with it. Conversely, the Ministry strongly encourages universities to be responsive to the needs and benefits of external audiences outside the HLIs. In fact, the sixth thrust area of the strategic plan calls for the inculcation of the culture of life-long learning among the citizens. MOHE policy on life-long learning indirectly covers some elements of community engagement. This is reflected through its concern for two important issues: identification of groups that require active engagement such as rural and urban poor, *Bumiputra* communities in Sabah and Sarawak, orang Asli and people with disabilities; and effective partnerships with all branches of Government, institutions, NGOs, business, industry, trade unions and professional bodies (MOHE, 2007). These indirectly demonstrate MOHE's concern with community development.

Moreover, on 1st December 2010, the Minister of HE, Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin stated that "Community engagement will feature prominently in our plans next year and the ministry will acknowledge programmes with significant social impact." As a clear sign of MOHE's commitment to community engagement, the Minister also emphasised that universities cannot function as ivory towers and must be committed to the community. In recognition of this, universities with the best community engagement programmes, will receive recognition and be financially rewarded from next year (The Star, 1st December 2010).

As mentioned previously, community engagement as defined in this study is still an emerging trend in HEIs in Malaysia. Most activities which involve relations with societies were not well-coordinated and structured and occurred not as the direct and conscious policy of the HLIs. The most well-known type of community engagement that has been conducted by HLIs was community service (Bakti Siswa) which has been in existence probably since the inception of HLIs in Malaysia. Although this type of activity was beneficial for both students and communities alike, it was not well-coordinated and did not happen as a result of universities' conscious planning and vision. Instead, most of the time, community service was organized by student bodies under the auspices or in collaboration with the Student Affairs Departments of the respective HLIs.

As noted earlier, the recent trends in higher education since the last decade of 20th century call for universities' commitment to society (for example, The Carnegie Initiative in the US and The Magna Carta Universitatum Bologna, 1998). This new international trend in higher education, has also affected Malaysia and as a result, community engagement has started to receive due attention from higher education scholars and policy makers in Malaysia. As a reflection of the Ministry's seriousness with university's societal role and the need for a structured and coherent programme for university-industry-community partnerships, in

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September 2007, a new senior management position, the Vice-Chancellor for industry and community engagement for the four research universities – Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, University Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia - and an additional university – Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), has been created (UKM's HEJIM website 2011).). In view of the paucity of literature on the subject, this study focuses on the experiences of the National University of Education (UKM).

2.3 Community Engagement: UKM/National University of Malaysia Experiences

Before the establishment of UKM's Industry and Community Partnerships (Hal Ehwal Jaringan Industri dan Masyarakat - HEJIM) in 2007, UKM had previously been involved in community relations on mostly uncoordinated and ad-hoc basis. However, the official establishment of a portfolio of a Deputy Vice Chancellor for Industry and Community Partnerships in September 2007 further enhanced its commitment to societal development and community engagement.
HEJIM's official website defines its roles as follows:

> The role of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Industry and Community Partnerships) is service-oriented. In the process of developing partnership activities with industry and community, it serves to support the research, education and service thrusts of the university. The nature of this portfolio is such that it enhances the portfolios of the other deputy vice-chancellors. Thus, it is very important for strong understanding and cooperation to exist between the various deputy vice-chancellors to ensure smooth, strategic and constructive engagement with industry and community takes place.

It further describes HEJIM's functions as follows:

> At UKM, this Deputy Vice Chancellor's role is to develop, maintain and sustain the university as a leading player in the establishment of mutually beneficial partnerships between the university, industry and community. This will be carried out not only at the national levels but also through regional and global partnerships. We strive to achieve this through structured governance, innovative policy and effective implementation.

With the establishment of this portfolio, UKM's vision and mission as regard industry and community relations have become more coherent and properly directed, epitomised by UKM's Industry and Community Engagement Strategic Plan, 2010-2014. The UKM industry and community engagement strategic plan provided a blue-print for achieving this vision- "UKM will be recognised nationally and internationally as a leading example of an engaged university." In order to achieve its goal, the office of the DVC (HEJIM), will work collectively with the three offices in its portfolio – the Industry Liaison Office, the University-Community Partnerships Office and the Chancellor's. In view of its well-planned strategies for community engagement, UKM has conducted its own civic engagement and social responsibility work as well as programmes in partnership with industry, government agencies and non-governmental organizations. Among the major projects are social and health community engagement in Pagoh and partnership with MERCY Malaysia and Langkawi Geopark.

2.4 UKM Curricular Engagement

CFT defines curricular engagement as "the teaching, learning and scholarship that engages faculty, students, and community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration. Their interactions address community identified needs, deepen students' civic and academic learning, enhance community well-being, and enrich the scholarship of the institution". Based on the definition, it is clear that UKM practices curricular engagement because it has developed curricular that have strong elements of community engagement. In some programmes three to six credit units are allocated industrial/practical/civic engagement training. Furthermore, some academic programs integrate classroom instruction with field work and experiential learning with community (Strengthening Community Engagement, UKM).

UKM's commitment to community engagement through curricular was reflected through the programmes in two faculties: the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Allied Health Science (UKM, 20-22). One key component of learning at the Faculty of Medicine is community/rural health which is taught throughout the five year programme. Students are posted in the rural areas for eight weeks followed by eight weeks of district hospital posting. Furthermore, students are also encouraged to select a community-oriented project for their

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five week elective posting. Indeed the UKM's Faculty of Medicine's community health practicum provides their students with an opportunity to apply knowledge to human/community needs.

At the Faculty of Allied Health Science, community engagement involves all members of the faculty: students, academics and administrative staff. Its goal is to "provide effective and sustainable health services to various communities" as well as promoting health awareness. Among the projects undertaken by the Faculty are the Community Health Programme, The Tanjong Karang Community Service Clinic, the Optometry Service Operation and the Community Dietetic Programme. Moreover, the Department of Audiology and Speech Sciences in partnership with Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia (PENYAYANG) has assisted in the establishment of a kindergarten for students with hearing impairment named the Tadika TUTUR (Speech Kindergarten). The aim of this kindergarten is to assist the disabled students to reintegrate with students in public schools. To achieve this goal, these students have had cochlea implants and will learn to communicate using revolutionary auditory verbal techniques.

It can be concluded that the initiatives on community engagement have now become a recognised function of nearly all universities including in Malaysia – at least in principle. However, this should be articulated clearly in the universities' mission statements. Most universities in Malaysia have been rather active in engaging industries in their teaching and research programmes. Unfortunately, however, community service and community-based participatory projects are still lacking. Community engagement is an emerging trend in Malaysian universities. While there are universities such as USM and UKM which have placed community engagement as their key values, the same cannot be said about some other universities. Due to the paucity of literature, this study provides a general scenario of community engagement in Malaysia and proceeds to focus on the experiences of UKM. UKM takes its engagement with industry and community very seriously. This is accomplished through driving strategic and sustainable collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders which comprises industry, community, government agencies and non-government organisations. UKM shares and exchanges knowledge, expertise, facilities and services with its partners to address economic, social and environmental challenges faced by communities, the nation and the region. All of this contributes to the development of human capital that meets the expectations of industry and the community and contributes to the well-being of the nation.

The HEJIM portfolio at UKM provides a structured platform of governance for the university to reach out and establish strategic relationships with industry and community. HEJIM works systematically and in a mode of mutual support with the Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellors for Research & Innovation, Academic & International Affairs and Student Affairs & Alumni. The efforts and initiatives are directly supported by 3 engagement offices - the Industry Liaison Office, Office of University-Community Partnerships, the Chancellor's Foundation – as well as the Heads of Industry and Community Partnerships at 13 Faculties and Directors at 14 research institutes. Due to time factor, USM's role in community engagement and betterment of humanity at large is not included but its strong commitment to community engagement is acknowledged.

3. CONCLUSION

The initiatives on community engagement have now become a recognised function of nearly all universities including in Malaysia – at least in principle. Most universities in Malaysia have been rather active in engaging industries in their teaching and research programmes. Unfortunately, however, community service and community-based participatory projects are still comparatively lacking. Community engagement is an emerging trend in Malaysian universities. While there are universities such as USM and UKM which have placed community engagement as their key values, the same cannot be said about some other universities. Research and Innovation in Malaysian higher education could be further improved by contextualising the scope of research to the needs, or emerging issues of community/ stakeholders. Similarly, research should be linked to the improvement of well-being and quality of life.

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