



The Cultural Mission of the University for Participatory and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

THE CULTURAL MISSION OF A UNIVERSITY

The universal mission of the university to serve humanity is achieved through its roles in teaching, research and service to community. The cultural mission of a university is where the university puts its resources in service of the community and is expected to be an active agent and partner in social change.

Under the rubric of culture the university steers research and curricula to meet emerging societal needs, provide innovative ideas and practices for the solution of local problems, improve the social importance of knowledge throughout the community, educate national subjects with developed intellect, imbued with values for responsible and productive citizenry and meet the challenges of multicultural societies and globalization.

The university which focuses on culture asks the what, how and why of teaching, research and service. Engaging in social change induces a cultural change in academia and society and allows independent thinking and opinion making about

societal issues such as hunger, health, poverty, social unbalances, climate change, environmental degradation, digital divide and conflicts.

The university serves as critic and conscience of society. It reconciles ethnic traditions with state rationality and legitimates them by founding a set of practices, a cultural image, a discourse or an institution. This is also part of the social contract of universities with direct effects on transparency and accountability as public institutions. It is a way of providing evidence of value for the financing spent on universities.

WHY THE NEED TO REINFORCE THE CULTURAL MISSION OF A UNIVERSITY?

In the globalised world of the K-economy, universities are increasingly being viewed as economic producers of knowledge, innovation, technology and skilled workers for wealth creation and comparative advantage for national competitiveness. Universities are also expected to generate revenue from the high demand for higher education by people from all corners of the world.

In such a market driven system performance indicators may be heavily inclined to tangible outcomes such as number of foreign students enrolled, patents filed, research products that are commercialized, return on rate of investment and quality outcomes. Consequently ethics and values education will inadvertently be sidelined because intangibles such as beliefs, spirituality, happiness, tolerance, mutual respect, sharing, caring, loving, et cetera are marginalized. Possible consequences are a lack of social sensitivity and communal engagement, with a lackadaisical attitude to social responsibility and community problems.

This is unfortunate because universities must continue to push the frontiers of understanding by producing knowledge for its enlightenment and empowering effects rather than just for its utilitarian role in the culture of enterprise. Whilst knowledge is an essential defining element of scientific and material progress, it is also essential for the preservation of values such as responsibility, right and wrong, good and evil, traditions, customs and culture which collectively give us our identity or national self knowledge.

Role of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

Why is it important for UKM to participate as an agent of change and to uphold the

cultural mission of a university? “Kebangsaan” means “national” in the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia. As the national university of Malaysia, it has a moral obligation to produce, protect and inculcate the idea of national self knowledge or culture and values that the country espouse. UKM also has a unique history. It was born out of the nationalist struggle to have a university that uses Bahasa Malaysia at the pinnacle of the national education system which is fundamental to national identity.

A university cannot do everything that a country espouses. This paper attempts to share an approach for participation in sustainable development that is being developed at UKM. It is the adoption of a holistic approach in teaching, research and service by focusing on areas of strength and integrating academics from a variety of disciplines for greater impact. The areas that UKM is consolidating include sustainable regional development, renewable energy, technology for health promotion, medical diagnosis and intervention, climate change, advanced materials and nanotechnology as well as sovereignty, globalisation and multiculturalism.

The aim is to achieve greater relevance for current and future needs, to have a more significant impact on society at large, to attract international participation and large research grants, to stimulate creativity with bigger research output such as publications, better policy formulation, more effective intervention strategies and programmes and to ensure ethical application of scientific inventions. The overall aim is to lay the foundation of a good innovation system in the university by linking not only resources and activities within the university but also with key stakeholders outside.

Central to this approach is making available UKM’s expertise and resources in participatory, bottom-up, people-centered development that will enhance the quality, social relevance and effectiveness of our educational and research programmes through links to the ‘real’ society or world.

UKM’s Research Innovation System

The innovation system is built by putting and linking all the university’s activities and resources in support of the areas of strength and linking them to external stakeholders such as government agencies at the federal, state and local levels, relevant industries and the local community. Wherever relevant, UKM works towards international standards of sustainability.

There are numerous examples of partnership between UKM's entities and other stakeholders. The examples given below pertain to sustainable regional development:

- The Institute for Sustainable Development (LESTARI) and the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) collaborated to make Langkawi the first UNESCO Geopark in Southeast Asia.
- The Lake Chini Research Center at the Faculty of Science and Technology and the Pahang State Government are collaborating to restore the Lake and its surrounding wetlands to achieve the category of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.
- The Institute of Malay World Studies (ATMA) and LESTARI are working together with the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture as well as the Kedah State Government to develop the 5th century Bujang Valley archaeological site and the rich flora and fauna areas of Mount Jerai for archaeo and ecotourism.
- The Institute of Solar Energy Research (SERI) collaborates with a non governmental organisation (NGO) to install and test stand-alone solar panels in remote Orang Asli villages. These panels have made a difference to the quality of life of the Orang Asli or indigenous people by providing power for productive activities and communication.

Examples of multidisciplinary research and integration in Lake Chini and its wetlands include the effectiveness of phytoremediation in removing pollutants from wastes, the effects of water changes in the lake on the lives of the indigenous people (Orang Asli) who live on the shores, the use of reeds from the lake for paper production by the Orang Asli and training them in entrepreneurial activities. Team members include environmental engineers, botanists, biotechnologists, chemists, anthropologists, health professionals, economists, business and marketing experts, psychologists and so on.

The Community has benefited through jobs and entrepreneurial activities generated by ecotourism, archaeotourism, the development of other services

industries such as financial and transport, as well as the growth of the manufacturing sector particularly the small and medium enterprises. It has also benefited from efforts to protect the environment and to build social well and unity as the crucial foundation for peace and economic prosperity. UKM benefits from “good neighbour relations” because the community is host to our students. All in all participation in sustainable development has led to good outcomes for UKM and a better quality of life for the community.

Partnership for Teaching and Learning

The community becomes the class room which gives holistic student learning experience for wholesome individual development and responsible citizenry. Partnership with the community is critical for the success of the outcome based curriculum which has been adopted by UKM. In the outcome based curriculum social responsibility and accountability, ethics, values and professionalism as well generic skills such as team work, communication skills, information management and life long learning skills, managerial and entrepreneurial skills are also important competences to be nurtured in the students, in addition to the knowledge and psychomotor skills acquisition.

In an outcome based approach, teaching and learning is not confined to the classroom but will also occur in co curricular activities in the residential colleges, the various student associations, on the sports field, in the center for performing arts, in community service, at the workplace and industry attachments. Student assessment is also not confined to pen and paper and practical tests but would also include observation of behaviour and the assessment of attributes such as leadership, team work and emotional intelligence. Apart from the academic faculty, assessors include peers, college masters, fellows and people from the community. Credits are awarded for co curricular activities. When communities are involved, they are usually pre-selected for long term cooperation and sustainability. The activities reflect the areas of strength and are organised by the faculties or the co curricular unit of the student development center. While some activities carry credits, the majority are done on a voluntary basis as service to the community.

During one of the worst floods in a southern state this year, student volunteers

helped in disaster management. The community became the living classroom for students to learn in a holistic manner about responsible citizenry. The community requested UKM to adopt it for further development.

Organisation for community participation

Realising that programmes involving research, educational and student activities involve different parts of the university, UKM has established a new portfolio of Deputy Vice Chancellor for Community and Industry Partnership. This office is responsible for initiating and coordinating multidisciplinary level initiatives and acts as a one stop center for community outreach. It documents the community service activities which account for 5% in the staff performance appraisal.

An example of a university level project is the adoption of the village of Kundang Hulu in Johor following the massive floods of 1997 and disaster relief done by students and staff of UKM. The community outreach unit has engaged various faculties to initiate projects for the villagers, including studies on flood mitigation. Other examples of community service projects are described in the accompanying paper entitled “Community Service Programmes in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia”

Role of UKM in inculcating national culture

I would like to move to another area which we feel is important for UKM as a national educational institution. This is the role of inculcating the idea of national self knowledge or culture and in producing responsible graduates with the values of integrity, sincerity, mutual respect, trustworthiness and respect of human dignity that the country espouses and which are enshrined in the nine principles of Vision 2020 as well most policy documents such as the Ninth Malaysia Plan and the Higher Education Strategic Plan..

In multi ethnic and multi religious Malaysia the university has to be an active agent and partner in social change because the notion of national self knowledge or culture is important as a unifying idea and fundamental for peace, security and economic progress.

UKM has policies and practices to value multiculturalism as our strength. We seek commonalities in our values system. For example, in Islam, the Prophet

Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) said “No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (Hadith as narrated by Bukhari and Muslim). Christians believe that “ All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you do ye even so to them” (Matthew, 7:12). Buddhists say “Hurt not others with that which pains yourself” (Udanavarga, 5:18). In Confucianism “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you”(The Analects Book 15:23), and in Hinduism “Good people proceed while considering that what is best for others is best for themselves” (Hitopadesa).

We “open our houses” to others of different faiths and cultures as we celebrate the various festivals such as the Id which comes at the end of Ramadan or Muslim fasting month, Chinese New Year, Deepavali or Hindu festival of lights, Wesak or birthday of Buddha, Vasakhi or New Year of the Sikhs and Christmas.

In UKM we have choreographed a signature dance called moving forward together – highlighting the richness of our performing Arts.

We continue to strengthen the idea of a nation being strongly attached to a national language. UKM continues to give exemplary service in developing the Malay language as the language of knowledge, particularly in science. To cope with the increasing need for English as a global language UKM has to be creative in preserving the symbol of unity. Today UKM adheres to the English language policy for the science and mathematics based courses but requires all students to write the final academic paper in Malay. To give greater space for the use and mastery of English as a global language, all residential colleges are turned into English speaking zones.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that the cultural mission of a university for sustainable development is pervasive in all its functions of teaching, research and community engagement. It is driven by values, ethical principles and convictions that are dear to us, that which are deep in our hearts, which appeal to us, and what matter in our lives.

University-community partnerships are valuable in instilling social responsibility and accountability. The real-life experience is critical for developing leadership, organizational ability, team spirit and responsibility. It is a classroom for inter ethnic

respect and valuing of cultural diversity. The community benefits from comprehensive development.

To be more effective the university has to reorganize its structure and administration to establish specific portfolios to better interact with the community. Participation must also count in staff appraisal and student assessment.

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¹ Culture can be defined as the accumulation of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions, concepts and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations.

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surrounding wetlands to achieve the category of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Lake Chini is the second largest natural freshwater lake in the state of Pahang covering 202 hectares. Research shows that the lake is able to accommodate the diversity of various flora and fauna, including the 51 species of low woodland vegetation, 15 species of freshwater plants, 25 species of aquatic plants and 87 species of freshwater fish.

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