

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE****DZULKIFLI
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Bolstering education for sustainable development

THE Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) aims to produce students who aspire to be "ethically and morally upright, spiritually grounded, compassionate and caring" and "appreciate sustainable development and a healthy lifestyle".

This interesting description appears under the subheading "ethics and spirituality" that links it with the issue of sustainable development.

The term "sustainable development" gained international attention and recognition in 1987 when the Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report, was formally released and endorsed. Sustainable development is generally defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development was established in 2005 to accelerate understanding of critical global and local issues and support actions on the ground. The decade came to a close in Nagoya, Japan last year.

It is inspiring to see an appreciation for sustainable development formally recognised as one of the key student attributes in the blueprint — it is even linked to

healthy lifestyles that are increasingly becoming unsustainable nationally. This may add to the many initiatives of higher education programmes in Malaysia, notably the ongoing engineering programmes that emphasise sustainable development as a key graduate attribute.

Moreover, in 2009, Malaysia pledged to reduce the nation's carbon emission intensity by up to 40 per cent by the year 2020 at the Copenhagen 15th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change meet.

With less than five years to go, the initiatives spurred by these policies to promote sustainable development and combat climate change in Malaysian society remain unclear. Higher education needs to play an even more active role to make this happen.

In fact, findings from a multi-stakeholder study conducted by Subarna Sivapalan and his colleagues (2013, 2014, 2015) — to investigate the extent to which undergraduate engineering programmes in the country advocate the need for sustainability-literate graduate engineers — show that there is presently a mismatch between the sustainability literacy demands of the industry and the graduate's sustainability attributes.

The findings also suggest that

academicians and researchers are still unclear about what sustainable development and education for sustainable development entail.

There is also a lack of pedagogical and content knowledge to teach or facilitate discussions in both areas.

Local universities, the industry, governmental agencies and the private sector should collectively play a role in advocating the need for sustainable development within tertiary institutions. What remains largely vague is the manner in which sustainable development should be institutionalised through higher education in the country.

Realising the importance of making transformational changes in the conservation realm, organisations such as WWF Malaysia view education for sustainable development as the next step forward, moving away from rote learning to experiential and contextual learning beyond a physical structure (i.e. classroom) to enable capacity building, community empowerment and advocacy of sustainable urbanisation and consumption involving universities and schools.

All these fit well with a university's mission of community engagement and knowledge co-creation.

Given the emphasis made by the blueprint, this will allow the Malaysian higher education system to develop a more robust education for sustainable development agenda in the context of the Post-2015 Development Goals, especially narrowing existing gaps. Tackling a local sustainability crisis with a Western education for sustainable development model will not make the cut because our contexts are different. So, how are we to embark on this?

Firstly, the presence of local advocacy for traditional knowledge and values, balance, consideration of the needs of the present and future within national, global and cosmic contexts are found wanting.

Secondly, the lack of a collective, multi-stakeholder approach to integrating sustainable development is a limitation which needs to be addressed immediately.

Thirdly, there is a need for the inclusion of sustainable development appreciation as a part of nurturing ethics and spirituality throughout the education systems.

Fourthly, sustainable development must be taught based on relevant philosophies and pedagogies involving real issues and engagements, and not as quick fixes to meet Key Performance Indicators and for the sake fulfilling

criteria or outcomes.

Lastly, education for sustainable development must permeate all levels of education, including programmes and modules that involve policy makers, administrators and implementers, be it in formal or informal settings.

A voluntary education for sustainable development workgroup was recently formed to bolster greater collaboration between stakeholders and to advocate the need for a more holistic and transformative agenda.

The workgroup was a key result of a brainstorming session on the future of education for sustainable development in the country involving education for sustainable development experts, researchers, academicians from public and private universities and schools, non-governmental organisations and business entities.

It has identified 11 key areas aligned with local, regional and global dialogues on education for sustainable development, with emphasis on Asian perspectives. Email esdworkgroup@gmail.com for details.

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