

Realizing sustainable development of higher education in Malaysia through 'soft skills' Maria Salih

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Abstract: The development of human capital is crucial and necessary since it drives the nation to the envisioned vision and mission. Without a quality human capital, a nation will be weak due to want of human factor that is capable of embarking on new initiatives and perspectives. A quality human capital comes from a quality education process. A carefully designed and well planned education system is vital in developing such human capital. Instilling soft skills into the lives of future generation is aimed at developing their knowledge, understanding, values and skills which are the essence of education for sustainable development. As such, in the recent launching of the Soft Skills components in the Public Universities in Malaysia, seven elements of soft skills and the possible strategies to infuse them into the curriculum of higher education were identified. This paper discusses some aspects of sustainable development and how the soft skills elements which have been identified can realized the sustainable development in higher education. Keywords: Higher education, human capital,

Malaysia, soft skills, sustainable development. Introduction

"The citizens are the most valuable asset of the country. Development of human capital and mind shift of the citizens is one big challenge. If we want a move towards a knowledgeable-based economy and be a sustainable first world country, the development of human capital should be a priority. In the context of a global world, a high human capital is a necessity and not a luxury. As such Malaysia is drastically accelerating the development of quality human capital" (statement made by the Prime Minister of Malaysia when presenting the 9th Malaysian Plan in Parliament, 31 March, 2006).

The emphasis on human capital has always been an important administration strategy of the Prime Minister of Malaysia when he first held the post in October 2003. The importance of building a quality human capital was further felt when 29 billion Malaysian Ringgit or 21% of the 2006 Budget was allocated to increase the human capital potential through education and training to about 5.7 million students. This is to ensure that the Malaysian citizens are excellent in acquiring knowledge and skills as well as having a unique characteristic. Sustainable development in higher education thus signals a commitment to produce an integrated human capital and educated individuals who can contribute to the development of a quality living of the society and also to a harmonious nation's environment.

According to the Prime Minister, the approach to develop human capital should be holistic. In this aspect, emphasis will be made on the development of knowledge, skills and intellectuality which includes literacy in Science and Technology and entrepreneurship. The holistic approach additionally involves the inculcation of progressive attitudes and high ethical and moral values. Thus, it is hoped that a first class mindedness holistic human capital will be produced. The infusion of the Soft Skills into the curriculum of higher education may contribute to the development of a holistic human capital, who can think of a future in which environment. societal and economic the considerations are balanced in the pursuit of development and improved quality of life.

One aspect which may help in promoting the quality of education is to upgrade the teaching and learning system. As such the institutions of higher learning should be able to play the role of an information disseminator or human capital that are not only knowledgeable but also possess the characteristics of a holistic individual. The higher learning institutions in Malaysia are moving forward to uphold and maintain the development of a whole and integrated human capital. This is in-line with the development of human capital as envisage by the Prime Minister of Malaysia in the 9th Malaysian Plan. This in turn reflects the quality of the graduates from the institution of higher learning in Malaysia. Some of the weaknesses identified of the graduates are that, they are not outstanding and lack the so called 'soft skills' demanded by society and the competitive job market. Hence, the institutions of higher learning are urged to produce quality graduates who are equally intelligent, possess excellent attitudes and high ethical and moral values.



As such, in the recent launching of the Soft Skills components in the Public Universities in Malaysia, seven elements of soft skills and the possible strategies to infuse them into the curriculum of higher education were identified. This paper will discuss some aspects of sustainable development and how the identified elements of soft skills can realize the sustainable development in higher education.

Education for sustainable development

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is an approach to the whole curriculum and management of an institution (school, college, universities. organizations etc) (http://www.esdtoolkit. org/references.htm). It has its roots in environmental and developmental education and it is not a new subject. Therefore, many of the building blocks of education for sustainable development are already present in most institutions. ESD is also about helping pupils to develop knowledge, understanding, values and skills. As such, the curriculum, approaches to teaching and the student's learning experiences are all key elements of an effective ESD.

There are three terms that are used simultaneously and interchangeably, namely, education for sustainable development (ESD). education for sustainability (EfS) and sustainable education (SE). Of the three, ESD is most often used because it is the terminology used frequently at the international level and within the UN documents. However, it is important to differentiate between education about sustainable development and education for sustainable development (ESD). The first is an awareness lesson or theoretical discussion while the latter is the use of education as a tool to achieve sustainability. In higher education, there is a need to go beyond awareness, and in this case, 'for' indicates a purpose whereby all education serves a purpose (http://www.esdtoolkit.org/references.htm).

Education is central to sustainability. However, the distinction between education as we know it and education for sustainability is enigmatic. Nevertheless, education and sustainability are inextricably linked. There are four major thrusts to begin the work of ESD (UNESCO, 1986): (i) improving basic education, (ii) reorient existing education to address sustainable development, (iii) develop public understanding, awareness, and (iv) training.

(i) Improving basic education

The first priority of ESD as outlined in Chapter 36 of *Agenda 21* (UNESCO, 1986) is to promote

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basic education. The content and years of basic education differ greatly around the world. For instance, in Malaysia, primary school is considered basic education and is compulsory for all children aged 7 onwards. Much focus is being put on the 3M (*Membaca, Menulis dan Mengira*) or the basic skills of reading, writing and counting. It is at this stage that children begin to communicate through the three skills and further develop these skills as they proceed higher in the education system. These generic skills are important and necessary to fulfill their respective roles in future.

Increasing basic literacy will not necessarily advance sustainable societies (UNESCO, 1986). This is currently carried out by most countries when they re-looked and assessed their curriculum from time to time. What most countries fail to focus are the skills, values and perspectives that support education for sustainability. Thus, basic education must be reoriented to address sustainability and extended to include critical thinking skills, skills to organize and interpret data and information, skills to formulate questions and the ability to analyze issues that confront communities.

The current level of basic education in most countries is also low, thus hindering plans for a sustainable future (www.esdtoolkit.org/discussion/ wahtisesd.htm). Latin America and the Caribbean for example, have 6-8 years of compulsory education with 5-15% of the children repeating one or more years. Some parts of Asia such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and India have children attending school for only 5 years. Girls also receive fewer years of education than boys. The drought and wars in parts of Africa hindered education for the children. The impact of little and/or poor quality education severely limits the options available to a nation for developing its short and long term sustainability (http://www.esdtoolkit.org/ plans discussion/wahtisesd.htm).

(ii) Reorienting existing education

Reorienting education is necessary at every level starting from nursery schools through university. The educators and administrators must understand the changes required for ESD. An appropriately reoriented existing education (basic and secondary education) should include more principles, skills, perspectives, and values related to sustainability which are currently not included in most education systems. Quantity of education is not important but rather the appropriateness and relevance are. Since ESD encompasses a vision that integrates environment, economy and society, reorienting education also requires teaching and



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learning knowledge, skills, perspectives and values that will guide and motivate people to pursue sustainable livelihoods, to participate in a democratic society and to live in a sustainable manner (http://www.esdtoolkit.org/discussion/ reorient.htm).

Despite that the need to reorient basic and secondary education to address sustainability has grabbed international attention, the need at tertiary level is equally important. This is because society's future leaders and decision makers are educated there. These are the young generation expected to lead all sectors of society (e.g., government, medicine, agriculture, forestry, law, business, industry, engineering, education, communications, architecture and arts) in a world striving towards sustainability. As such the current administration and faculty members must reorient university curriculums to include the many and complex facets of sustainability.

Reorienting education to address sustainability should happen continuously throughout the formal education system such as universities, professional schools (e.g. law and medicine), and technical schools in addition to primary and secondary education.

(iii)Public understanding and awareness

Sustainability requires a population that is aware of the goals of a sustainable society and has the knowledge and skills to contribute to those goals. With the increasing number of democratic governments, there is a need for an informed voting citizenry which lends support to enlighten policies and government initiatives so as to help the government enact sustainable measures. In today's world, people are surrounded by the media (e.g television, radio, newspapers, and magazines) and advertisements (e.g. bill boards, banners on World Wide Web sites, and logos). As such, the citizens must become media literate and able to analyze the messages of corporate advertisers and also knowledgeable consumers who can see beyond the 'green wash' (i.e. public relations efforts that highlight the activities of corporations that are more environmentally responsible while ignoring or hiding the major activities that are not). (iv) Training

The world needs a literate and environmentally aware citizenry and work force to help guide the nations in implementing their sustainability plans. As such every sector including business, industry, higher education, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community organization are encouraged to train their leaders in environmental management and to provide training to their workers. Training is distinct from education in that training is often specific to a particular job or class of jobs. Training teaches individuals how to use equipment safely, to be more efficient and comply with regulations. Training also inform people of accepted practices and procedures and gives them skills to perform specific tasks. In contrast, education is a socially transforming process that provides people with knowledge, skills, perspectives, and values through which they can participate in and contribute to their own wellbeing and that of their community and nation.

Formal, non-formal and informal education

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Implementing ESD is an enormous task for any community or nation. Fortunately, formal education does not carry this educational responsibility alone. The non-formal education sector (e.g. centres, non-governmental organizations, educators and agents) and the informal education sector (e.g television, newspaper and radio) of the educational community must work cooperatively with the formal educational sector for the education of people in all generations and walks of life. Since ESD is a lifelong process, the formal, non-formal, and informal educational sectors need to work together to accomplish local sustainability goals.

Why sustainable development in higher education?

In this era of modernization and globalization, higher education has a responsibility to produce a human capital that is not only professionals of the future but also responsible citizens. Higher education needs to foster the human capital with the skills and attitudes that will allow all people, present and future, to have a decent quality of life, fair and equitable access to the earth's resources and preserve the biological diverse ecosystems on which we all depend on. Helping create a sustainable society is a social responsibility both for the educators of future leaders in society and for our graduates in their professional and personal lives.

Sustainable development in higher education will enable students to develop a personal critique of society and produce graduates who are ideologically aware and socially critical. It also facilitates 'deep learning' in other areas. For instance, active learning strategies can help develop generic skills such as critical thinking, 'systems' thinking, teamwork, ability to manage change, oral and written communication, negotiation or time management. These skills are much desired by most employer groups.

The social, political and economic implications of sustainability place new demands on many professional groups in society, across government, industry and community sectors. It is more so for an education university to recognize and develop a better understanding of practices that can achieve desired outcomes in ways that advance, not detract from efforts to move toward sustainability. As such, it is utmost important to educate and train students as professional of the future and responsible citizens to endeavour the above obligations. If students understand sustainability as an aspect of their social and ethical responsibility, they will become citizens who see themselves as connected to the natural world and to other humans. Thus, they will have the capacity to facilitate the development of activities that sustain rather than degrade. Institutions of higher provide education must the awareness, knowledge, skills and values that equip individuals to pursue life goals in a manner that sustains human and non-human well-being for all current and future generations.

Critical to achieving the goals of sustainability is learning for understanding. It is here that Higher institutions play its role to ensure that it is enabling learning that is authentic and deep. This strictly refers to inquiry-based learning as being innovated in the science curriculum of the country. The inquiry-based learning is driven and motivated by the students and their curiosities about the world they live in. Problem solving, problem-based learning and future perspectives are examples of inquiry-based curriculum approaches that support education for sustainability. Active learning such as project work can offer experiential and problembased learning and also foster awareness of sustainability objectives. The flexibility of project work enables students to bring their own sustainability concerns of the general education agenda. Students should also have the ability to develop creativity and imagination. Both areas are important thinking and learning tools that can encourage viewing the challenges of sustainability from multiple dimension. This will promote development of alternative understandings that inform and develop innovative sustainable practices.

What are 'Soft skills?'

In the Malaysian context, 'Soft skills' can be said to incorporate all aspects of generic skills. This include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006). Though there are no specific soft

skills, majority of these skills are associated with positive values, leadership skills, team work, communicative skills and life-long learning. Soft skills are identified to be the most critical skills in the current global job market especially in a fast pace era of technology (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006). The reorientation of education which is one of the trust of education for sustainability also relates the importance of these so-called 'soft skills'. Once the graduates has attained the above mentioned soft skills, they not only meet the needs of the job market but also indirectly exposed to the skills envisioned in ESD.

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Vast research and expert opinions were sought in the effort to determine the specific soft skills to be implemented and used in the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Based on the research findings obtained, seven soft skills were identified and chosen. They are: i) Communicative skills, ii) Critical thinking and Problem solving skills, iii) Team work skills iv) Life-long learning and Information Management skills, v) Ethics, moral and professional skills, vi) Entrepreneur skills and vii) Leadership skills (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006).

Each of the above soft skills comprised of several sub-skills. These sub-skills are divided into two categories of implementation. The first category delineates the soft skills that every individual **must have** and the second category represents soft skills that are **good to have**. Despite the emphasis being put on the soft skills that must be present (**must have**), it is also encouraged to inculcate the soft skills that are **good to have**. All elements of soft skills that have been suggested by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia must be acquired by each individual student and evaluated effectively and comprehensively. Table 1 shows the seven soft skills and the two categories of subskills respectively.

The **must have'** soft skills must be acquired by each and every individual in the institutions of higher learning without which, the student is regarded as incompetent in the above skills. The 'good to have' soft skills can be regarded as the additional generic skills and a bonus to the students.

How can soft skills realize sustainable education in higher education?

It can be said that education is an essential tool for achieving sustainability. The public



No.	Soft Skills	'Must Have' Elements	'Good To Have' Elements
1.	Communicative Skills	Ability to deliver idea clearly, effectively and with confidence either orally or in writing. Ability to practice active listening skill and respond. Ability to present clearly and confidently to the audience.	Ability to use technology during presentation. Ability to discuss and arrive at a consensus. Ability to communicate with individual from a different cultural background. Ability to expand one's own communicative skill. Ability to use non-oral skills.
2.	Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills	Ability to identify and analyze problems in difficult situation and make justifiable evaluation. Ability to expand and improve thinking skills such as explanation, analysis and evaluate discussion. Ability to find ideas and look for alternative solutions.	Ability to think beyond. Ability to make conclusion based on valid proof. Ability to withstand and give full responsibility. Ability to understand and accommodate oneself to the varied working environment.
3.	Team Work Skills	Ability to build a good rapport , interact and work effectively with others. Ability to understand and play the role of a leader and follower alternatively. Ability to recognize and respect other's attitude, behaviour and beliefs.	Ability to give contribution to the planning and coordinate group work. Responsible towards group decision.
4.	Life-Long Learning & Information Management Skills	Ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources. Ability to receive new ideas and perform autonomy learning.	Ability to develop an inquiry mind and seek knowledge.
5.	Entrepreneurship Skills	Ability to identify job opportunities.	Ability to propose business opportunity. Ability to build, explore and seek business opportunities and job. Ability to be self-employed.
6.	Ethics, Moral & Professional Skills	Ability to understand the economy crisis, environment and social cultural aspects professionally. Ability to analyze and make problem solving decisions related to ethics.	Ability to practice ethical attitudes besides having the responsibility towards society.
7.	Leadership Skills	Knowledge of the basic theories of leadership. Ability to lead a project.	Ability to understand and take turns as a leader and follower alternatively. Ability to supervise members of a group.

Table 1. The 'must have' and 'g	good to have' elements of soft skills
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(Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006)



awareness, education and training are the key elements to move our society towards sustainability. Only a quality future human capital can envision the development of its nation to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It can be observed that the soft skills identified here jive well with the skills necessary for sustainable development. Therefore. the inculcation of soft skills among the students will be two prongs, to produce quality human capital and to develop their knowledge, understanding, values and skills. How these skills can be integrated will be discussed here.

i) Communicative skills

What is found to be missing in the nation's present human capital is the lack of communicative skills. This is more so with the implementation of the English language in some school subjects such as science and mathematics. The incompetence of the future graduates to master Bahasa Melayu (national language of Malaysia) and English will be a set-back to a lot of potential development and advancement of the country. Thus, this is a good time to reorientate the curriculum of higher institutions to embed communicative skills.

The communicative skills emphasize is the effective communication in both the languages in different contexts. There are eight sub-skills under communicative skills of which three are the must have skills and five are the good to have skills. Communicative skills are an integral part of any education system either in higher or lower education. As mentioned earlier, in many countries, basic education or primary education is mandatory and it focuses on reading, writing and arithmetic. People learn to read books, write letters, figure accounts and develop skills necessary to fulfill their expected roles in their households and community. At this very level, emphasis has been given to develop the communicative skills of the individuals so that by the time they leave college, they are able to participate in public and community activities and in decisions making. The absence of good communicative skills some how or rather has an influence on the poor presentation of their views and decisions made to gain others' confidence and respects. Communicative skills have also been greatly emphasized in the reorientation of basic education for ESD which is: the ability to communicate effectively (both orally and in writing).

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ii) Critical thinking and problem solving skills

These skills include the ability to think critically, creatively, innovatively and analytically. It also involves the ability to apply knowledge and understanding to new and different problems. For the ESD to be successful, it must provide practical skills that will enable people to continue learning after they have left school, to have a sustainable livelihood and to live sustainable lives. The critical thinking skills, skills to organize and interpret data and information, skills to formulate questions and the ability to analyze issues that confront communities are greatly addressed in the reorientation of basic education in ESD. The following are some examples of skills that comply to ESD and some of these skills are similar to the 'soft skills' being emphasized in the curriculum of higher education in Malaysia: a) the ability to think about systems (both natural and social sciences), b) the ability to think in time-to forecast, to think ahead, and to plan, and c) the ability to think critically about value issues, d) the ability to separate number, quantity, quality and values. All the above skills are crucial and students will require them as adults.

iii) Team work skills

This is the ability to work with people from different social cultural background to achieve a common goal. Students are encouraged to play their role in the group and to respect the opinions and attitudes of others in the group. They are also expected to contribute to the group's plan and coordinate the group's effort besides being responsible to the group's decision. This skill is also part of ESD as stated in the reorientation of basic education: the ability to work cooperatively with other people. If the future human capital can attained these skills, we can rest assure that the future generation will collaborate ideas and cooperate a taskforce towards the well-being of the nation.

iv) Life-long learning and information management skills

This skill involves an effort to learn to be independent or self-regulate learning in acquiring skills and new knowledge. The ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources is also a criterion of this soft skill. Besides this, students are also expected to develop an inquiry mind and crave for knowledge. As understood earlier, these characteristics are equally important in ESD in order for an individual to be media literate and consumer knowledgeable. Life-long learning will enable individuals to accumulate as much knowledge and skills over the years. The ability to manage information well will allow an individual to distinguish between good and bad, to adopt the best practices and to make sound decisions.

v) Entrepreneurship skills

This skill refers to the ability to seek business opportunities and develop risk awareness. It also involve being creative and innovative in activities related to business and tasks. To be able to design and plan business propositions and the ability to be self employed is one aspect of entrepreneurship skill. This skill can in some ways contribute to ESD if the training and practice is done for a good purpose.

vi) Ethics, moral and professional skills

These are the ability to practice a high moral standard in professional tasks and social interactions. It also includes the ability to analyze ethical problems and make problem solving decisions. Having a sense of responsibility towards society is another criterion of this soft skill. A majority of the skills and values of ESD also emphasized these soft skills.

vii) Leadership skills

This skill denotes the ability to lead in various activities and tasks. It is an important criterion in ESD for planning and implementing ideas in a group. This skill is also important to lead in discussions and decisions making.

Model for implementing soft skills in higher education

A holistic approach is used to plan and implement the soft skills among students of higher education. This approach is based on the combination of several programmes and main activities; formal teaching and learning activities (including all curricular and co-curricular elements); support programmes (academic and non-academic focused) and the students' campus life (students' residences and the campus surroundings). Fig. 1 shows the framework for the implementation of soft skills among students of higher institutions in Malaysia. In general, the development of soft skills among the students via the formal teaching and learning activities takes shape in two models: i) stand alone and ii) embedded.

i) Stand alone subject model

This model uses the approach of training and providing opportunities to students to develop soft skills through specific courses that are carefully planned for this purpose. Usually, these subjects are offered as university courses (such as English http://www.indjst.org

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language, Islamic civilization, entrepreneurship, etc) and elective courses (such as public speaking, critical thinking, etc). The courses in this category are often a part of the overall requirements that make up the programme. The number of courses and credits in this category depends on the curriculum design and the requirements of the programme. The stand alone subject model can also be initiated by encouraging students to signup several additional courses which can be accumulated to be a minor course which is different from the initial programme signed-up. For example, a student who is pursuing an engineering course is encouraged to take minor courses in management or mass communication. However, such an approach will require an increase in the number of credits and time spent for the particular programme.

ii) Embedded model

This model uses the approach of embedding the soft skills in the teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand alone subject model. Instead, the students are trained to master the soft skills through various formal teaching and learning activities that are planned and carried out using specific strategies and methods. In this way, the content and learning outcomes to be achieved for the respective courses are maintained. The learning outcomes related to the soft skills will be integrated and be part of the learning outcomes of the respective courses. This is the suggested model to be implemented in all courses for the different programmes in institutions of higher learning. Each element of soft skills is spelled out in the learning outcome and then translated into the instructional plan for the semester. This is followed by implementing several teaching and learning activities such as questioning, class discussion, brain storming, team work, presentation, role play and simulation, task/project, field work and site visits.

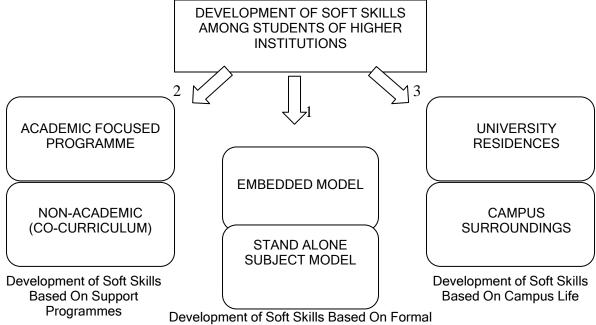
In general, the development of soft skills using the embedded model requires the expertise of the lecturers to use the various teaching strategies and methods that are entirely student-centered. It also involves active teaching and learning and students should participate actively in the activities. Some of the appropriate strategies and methods that are practical include a) learning by questioning, b) cooperative learning, c) problem-based learning (PBL) and d) e-learning.





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iii) Combination of the stand alone subject model and the embedded model

Each of the respective models described above has its strengths and weaknesses. By looking at the framework, planning, implementing and assessment, one can understand that the stand alone model is more favorable. This is because the course or subject is specially developed to assist students to acquire the soft skills. However, this model lacked the opportunity for students to develop holistically and in integration with other disciplines. The existing number of credits for the respective programme is also a constraint for students to sign-up for additional courses on soft skills.

On the contrary, the framework, planning, implementing and assessment of the embedded model are more challenging than the stand alone model. This model requires the lecturers to master specific teaching and learning skills and then apply them in teaching the respective core courses for the specific programme. However, when carefully planned and coupled with the appropriate teaching and learning strategies, this model is more effective in developing and acquiring the soft skills as integration with the other disciplines. In addition, this model does not require any additional courses to the already existing courses of the respective programme.

Based on the strengths and weaknesses discussed, the higher education institutes are encouraged to use the embedded model as compared to the stand alone model. This is because the embedded model focused on student centered learning such as experiential learning and problem-based learning (PBL). It additionally gives students the practical experience as well.

Development of 'soft skills' through support programmes

This involves programmes and activities that are created, developed and used to support soft skills either directly or indirectly. In general, the programmes and activities can be divided into two: (i) academic support programmes and (ii) nonacademic support programmes.

The academic support programmes is to help students acquire the soft skills that are associated with academic matters. Some of these programmes include 'Learning Skills' and 'English Language Support Program (ELSP).

The non-academic support programmes on the other hand assists students to acquire the soft skills that are not related to academic matters but more of the individual and professional development of the students. Most of the



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programmes and activities are in the form of cocurricular and extra co-curricular.

The development of 'soft skills' through campus life activities

Most university students spent half of their students' life living in residences at the university campus. As such, institutions of higher learning should use this golden opportunity to develop their soft skills. This can be done through carefully crafted programmes and carrying them out in the conducive campus grounds.

Conclusion

The strength of a nation is strongly dependent on the ability of its citizen to be highly intellectual and skillful in order to live to the challenges of globalization which is in line with the era of information economy. The development of human capital is thus crucial and necessary since it drives the nation to the envisioned vision and mission. Without a quality human capital, a nation will be weak as there is no human factor that is capable to embark on new initiatives and perspectives. A quality human capital comes from a quality education process. A carefully designed and well planned education system is vital in developing such human capital. Thus, institutions of higher learning play a very important role to produce a human capital that is highly knowledgeable and skillful to meet the demands and expectations of many people. The teaching and learning processes in institutions of higher learning should be capable to provide such knowledge and skills to future graduates.

Although the notion of sustainability was not imposed in the embedding of the above soft skills in the curriculum of higher education, it emerged as an essential skill during the implementation stage. Therefore, instilling soft skills into the lives of future generation is aimed at developing their knowledge, understanding, values and skills which is well reflected in the wishes of the government to develop a quality human capital.

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