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Universiti Sains Malaysia's APEX Journey: Ready, Capable and Willing

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Universiti Sains Malaysia became Malaysia's first university to be inducted in the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) in early September 2008 (Chapman & Kaur, 2008). What is meant is that the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) expects Universiti Sains Malaysia to be listed in the world's top 100 universities by the year 2013.

Universiti Sains Malaysia on its part advocates seven thrust areas as fundamentals to shape the nation's first APEX university, namely The Future, Uniqueness, Sustainability, Humanity, Universality, Change, and Sacrifice (Dzulkifli, 2009). It strives for a future that is sustainable "by utilising higher education as the platform to reach out towards humankind as a whole while extending firm support to major international goals such as the Millennium Development Goals, Education for All, Education for Sustainable Development" (The APEX Status). The crux of APEX from USM's perspective is encapsulated in its "Mission and Vision" statement:

Vision

Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow

Mission

Universiti Sains Malaysia is a pioneering, transdisciplinary research intensive university that empowers future talent and enables the bottom billions to transform their socio-economic well-being.

The key word of APEX is *transformation*, viz. a fast track (Accelerated) development Programme to transform higher education institutions to attain Excellence. The Malaysian government has made funds available through MoHE for Universiti Sains Malaysia to transform itself within the aforesaid stipulated timeline into a higher education institution of international standing and repute.

It is imperative then that Universiti Sains Malaysia's transformation process is recorded and scrutinised consistent with APEX that serves as a pathfinder and catalyst for transforming other Malaysian higher

education institutions through best-practices, human capital development, and policy improvements. Towards fulfilling this end the APEX University Research Agenda (AURA) Project (2008-2014) is tasked to provide a scholarly record, analysis and evaluation of the transformational experiences of the Universiti Sains Malaysia community (academic and administrative staff members, undergraduates and postgraduates). AURA focuses on the development and transformation of Universiti Sains Malaysia through three phases, i.e. the pre-APEX period (last quarter of 2008); APEX transformation phase (2009-2013); and the post-APEX stage (2014 and thereafter).

status and to ascertain changes in the profiles of the campus community as they undergo the APEX transformation process experience.

The aforesaid four papers are part of the preliminary research and findings of AURA. On-going research is underway in the second period, namely the APEX transformation phase (2009-2013) that promises more exciting findings. Meanwhile details of the aforesaid research and their findings are currently being reviewed by Universiti Sains Malaysia Press for publication as a single volume.

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“The key word of APEX is transformation, viz. a fast track (Accelerated) development Programme to transform higher education institutions to attain Excellence.”

In this Special Issue of BHER, four papers are offered based on findings from AURA. Ratna Roshida Ab. Razak and Zainal Abidin Sanusi from the AURA-Historical Group examined the interrelationship between the objectives and thrust of APEX and the transformational strategies of Universiti Sains Malaysia in their co-authored paper “The APEX Initiative and Universiti Sains Malaysia’s Strategies.”

The second paper “Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX): Expectations of Undergraduate Students” is the results of a pilot project conducted by the AURA-Understand, Expect, Aspire (UEA) Group on students’ expectations of Universiti Sains Malaysia in relation to APEX. Premalatha Karupiah, Intan Hashimah Mohd. Hashim and Norzarina Mohd. Zaharim revealed some intriguing feedbacks voiced by Universiti Sains Malaysia’s undergraduates.

Hasnah Haron and Noor Hazlina Ahmad from the AURA-Governance Group present their research findings in “Governance, Human Resources, and Service Quality in Universiti Sains Malaysia in the Pre-APEX Period”. Although the Universiti Sains Malaysia community appeared ready, capable and willing, there remained weaknesses where avenues of improvement need to be addressed.

See Ching Mey, Melissa Ng Lee Yen Abdullah and Rahimi Che Aman from the AURA-Biopsychosocial Group detailed the New Mind Maps and the Behavioural Management System (BeMIS); two instruments to assess the mental health

The APEX Initiative and Universiti Sains Malaysia's Strategies

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Introduction

In September 2008, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) inducted Universiti Sains Malaysia as the sole institution for the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX), a fast-track development programme for higher education institutions (HEIs) to achieve recognition as world class institutions.* For the selection process, Universiti Sains Malaysia submitted a proposal that contained a two-pronged transformational goal within the APEX framework, namely "transforming higher education for a sustainable tomorrow" and becoming "world renowned as a sustainable-led university" (USM, 2008). Universiti Sains Malaysia intends to move forward the sustainability agenda by reinvigorating and transforming its teaching and learning programmes, research and development (R&D) activities, and various services to produce more meaningful quality outcomes. These efforts are geared toward the attainment of global visions as endorsed universally since the Rio Summit in 1992 (Dzulkifli, 2009).

APEX is aimed at helping selected institutions to achieve international competitiveness. It acts as a catalyst to elevate Malaysia's entire higher education system to a higher level of excellence, and subsequently to produce a world class university. APEX also tries to promote top-level research and teaching and to benchmark them to those who are of international standing. It is pertinent that universities cooperate with other top universities and at the same time forge collaborations with top non-university research institutes (MoHE, 2007). This programme allows universities to re-examine existing forms, structures, norms, and business models in order to craft new instruments, regulations and procedures necessary for pursuing excellence in performance and competitiveness. APEX thus serves as a pathfinder and catalyst for the transformation of other institutions through best-practices, first-class human capital development and policy improvements.

Universiti Sains Malaysia rigorously pursues and expands the nurturing of human beings as the seeds of sustainable social transformation amongst its campus community - both staff (academic and administrative) and students (undergraduates and postgraduates). It believes that students and staff must be provided with learning opportunities in the real world environment in order to integrate relevant knowledge and concepts of sustainability across thinking, practices, applications and solutions. Universiti Sains Malaysia's outreach programmes in turn, introduces sustainability as an over-arching principle to both local and global communities.

In other words, Universiti Sains Malaysia integrates sustainable development into its education ecosystem. Its transformation plan includes the revamping of postgraduate studies, students and self development services, and alumni initiatives.

Universiti Sains Malaysia has since marked five core agendas as its APEX thrusts: (1) transforming higher education, (2) creating high value flagships, (3) reaching out to the bottom billion, (4) translating sustainability into action, and (5) leveraging scenario planning through the Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS) and change management. These five agendas are contextualised within the principles and values of the future, uniqueness, sustainability, humanity, universality, change and sacrifice which are realigned to support a society of high income, sustainability, and inclusiveness. The foregoing agenda and the ongoing transformation processes of Universiti Sains Malaysia under the APEX programme resonate extremely well with Malaysia's New Economic Model which also outlines similar foundations, namely; high income growth (high value flagship projects in the Universiti Sains Malaysia scenario), inclusiveness (bottom billion) and sustainability (sustainability).

"APEX is aimed at helping selected institutions to achieve international competitiveness. It acts as a catalyst to elevate Malaysia's entire higher education system to a higher level of excellence, and subsequently to produce a world class university."

The Universiti Sains Malaysia-APEX Initiative

The Universiti Sains Malaysia-APEX initiative is applicable to many areas, such as economic development, environmental and natural resources management, food production, energy and social-cultural dimensions, and lifestyles engaged

in a trans-disciplinary mode. Within this framework, Universiti Sains Malaysia focuses its vision on a sustainable tomorrow while steadfastly promoting values such as equity, accessibility, availability, affordability and quality as universally accepted optimal endpoints. Furthermore, Universiti Sains Malaysia embraces the protection of multiple ecosystems, the conservation and restoration of resources as well as the development of human and intellectual capitals. It facilitates the meeting of existing and future global and universal aspirations toward the elevation of the billions who are trapped at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. Subsequently, Universiti Sains Malaysia has taken proactive and productive steps to transform itself as a reputable research-intensive university dedicated to the promotion of wellness and the wellbeing of the human ecosystem.

“Through the APEX initiative, Universiti Sains Malaysia attempts to be an agent of change in transforming higher education for a sustainable society. To this end, Universiti Sains Malaysia adopts a holistic approach that takes into account aspects of curriculum development, teaching-learning process, research and community engagement.”

Universiti Sains Malaysia also promotes a cross and interdisciplinary curriculum that incorporates the concept of sustainability through the dimensions of spirituality. The curriculum is important in inculcating awareness among the younger generation of their responsibilities as individuals to others in the community. In addition to this, the learning outcomes of courses that are taught create a situation that enables students to interact with nature and observe the intelligence within such as the sounds of the sea, the beauty of a sunset or the scent of roses. This is important to affirm that man is a responsible being and also ‘the vicegerent’ of the Earth who grants respect to the right of existence of other species thereby promoting the interconnectedness of all forms of life (Smith, 1955).

Through the APEX initiative, Universiti Sains Malaysia attempts to be an agent of change in transforming higher education for a sustainable society. To this end, Universiti Sains Malaysia adopts a holistic approach that takes into account aspects of curriculum development, teaching-learning process, research and community engagement. The nurturing and learning processes will be enhanced by targeting areas such as the development of skills and competencies (introducing innovative and creative methods of nurturing and learning), and linking research to learning (disseminating research findings through classrooms and the community). Various programmes that promote a deeper understanding of the concept of sustainability will ensure that the knowledge accrued by students and staff will compel them to be more involved, committed and dedicated toward the sustainable wellness of the institution, community and global environment.

Sustainable development is defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). Thus, the sustainable development agenda is about meeting the needs of human beings rather than pursuing a brand of development that is driven by greed. For this purpose, education is considered the most effective means through which to ensure that people do not live beyond their means – a currently observable phenomenon which has resulted in un-sustainable development. Universiti Sains Malaysia is of the conviction that its sole purpose is not just to produce the human resource needed for the country’s job market but more importantly, to mould its graduates in line with the goals of the New Economic Model which is geared toward societal well being in its entirety (the rakyat’s quality of life).

*A newer definition of the term “world class” should be formulated by utilising more appropriate and relevant parameters to differentiate it from conventional definitions of the term.

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Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX): Expectations of Undergraduate Students

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Introduction

Students' expectations and their relationships with university policy are important but pose complex issues for analysis. Students' expectations towards higher education institutions have changed due to the paradigm shift in students' views on higher education. In recent years, in some countries higher education is no longer seen as a privilege but as a legal right and this contributes to the emergence of consumer culture in higher education. As a result, higher education is increasingly seen as a 'commodity' to be consumed (Kaye, Bickel & Birtwistle, 2006). Using the analogy of consumer to students is not without problems. A conspicuous problem of this analogy is the nature of 'consumer' and 'consumption' that is comparatively different in the context of education. In higher education, the participation and contribution of students are important and essential in order to produce the desired output, namely skills, knowledge or qualifications (Jones, 2010). Such consumerist orientation has tremendously increased students' expectations in higher education (James, 2001). Many higher education institutions are trying to fulfil the expectations of the students (Longden, 2006; Jones, 2010). Academics, on the other hand, are puzzled and worried with these expectations especially when students' expectations challenge the ethics of academia. Many academics feel that students' expectations are unrealistic and threaten the quality of higher education and should not be the main driving force in deciding the policy in a university (James, 2001).

In addition, policy change in higher education may influence the expectations of students. The increase in tuition fees for higher education around the world, for example, has contributed to higher expectations among students (Jones, 2010). In August 2008, the Malaysian government selected Universiti Sains Malaysia for the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) in recognition of it being the university with the highest potential to become a renowned university in the world (Kaur & Chapman, 2008). As a policy, APEX emphasises the quality of academic work as fuelled by talents and commitment. This element is somewhat inconsistent with the emerging consumer culture in higher education. It may be the driving force contributing to possible mismatched expectations between university students and the policy governing the university.

This paper is based on an ongoing study on the changes in understanding, expectations and aspirations of Universiti Sains Malaysia community during the implementation of APEX. It is an attempt to look into undergraduate students' expectations towards the university and if their expectations are realistic and in line with the policy implemented at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Data and Methods

The data for this paper was collected by conducting two focus group interviews with undergraduate students in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Ten students participated in these focus group interviews. In the interviews, which were conducted in Malay and English, students discussed their understanding and expectations regarding APEX.

"In August 2008, the Malaysian government selected Universiti Sains Malaysia for the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) in recognition of it being the university with the highest potential to become a renowned university in the world."

Findings

Based on the interviews, the students' expectations could be categorised into three themes, viz. 'facilities and benefits', 'learning and assessment' and 'sustainability'. The students expected the quality of teaching and learning to be higher with the implementation of APEX. They felt that the methods of assessment needed to be changed and there was too much emphasis on examinations at the university. As a result, they felt that they did not remember much of the content of their courses when examinations were over. One student suggested that examinations should be done orally rather than in written form while another wanted to totally eliminate examinations. These ideas were not accepted by other participants in the focus group. However, they wanted more emphasis given to testing skills which might be useful when they seek employment in the future. They had expectations that they would be sought after by employers as graduates of 'an APEX university'. At the same time, some students highlighted that they were unsure about their career options while some were worried that they were not trained for a particular occupation.

Some students felt that the university should subsidise text books as they found these books rather expensive even though they received loans for their degree programmes from the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN). Furthermore, they felt that the funds which the university received for APEX should benefit them.

“The students’ expectations in this study show some elements of ‘consumerist’ views in education. They expected to maximise benefits for their investment of time and money at the university.”

As for facilities, most students highlighted the lack of some facilities on campus. They wanted better bus services to enable them to attend lectures and participate in other campus activities. A good bus service was seen as a way to encourage students to be more involved in sustainable practices. They were interested in participating and expected more activities on campus which were environmental friendly, such as planting trees, reducing the use of plastic bags and polystyrene containers. They felt that these sustainable practices were important for the university and the world.

Discussion

University policy shapes the expectations of students. The students’ expectations in this study show some elements of ‘consumerist’ views in education. They expected to maximise benefits for their investment of time and money at the university. From the focus group interviews, the students’ expectations do not concentrate on the ‘real’ quality of education. If anything, their expectations are on the opposite of quality and commitment which are two essential elements in the policy of APEX. Students mainly expected education to be made simple and profitable for them. This indicates how changes in policy (in this case APEX) sometimes create unrealistic expectations among students. Such expectations will not be accepted in higher education mainly because higher education institutions are required to maintain a certain level of standards. Students’ expectations may sometimes contradict core academic values.

There are also some mismatches between the policy being implemented in Universiti Sains Malaysia and students’ understanding of the policy. For example, the students discussed much about ‘sustainability’ but their understanding of ‘sustainability’ focused on practices

which are environmental friendly rather than the broader meaning of sustainability which is the thrust of Universiti Sains Malaysia for the last decade. Furthermore, better bus services favoured by students may not be the best way to promote a healthy life style. While buses emit smoke which pollutes the environment, students tend to walk less, hence less physical activity.

Other expectations that emerged from the study are related to the students’ concern regarding their future career and aspirations. This is particularly related to the expectations to learn skills which may be relevant to their future workplace or the use of advance technology in education. These expectations are important and relevant for uplifting the current quality of higher education in Malaysia.

Conclusion

From the study, it can be concluded that consumer culture in higher education may lead to unrealistic expectations that sometimes conflict the policy of higher education that emphasises on quality and commitment. Some important yet complex key concepts such as sustainability can also be misunderstood. On the other hand, we must acknowledge students’ expectations with regard to their job opportunities. This study highlights the importance of understanding not only of students’ mismatches and misunderstanding but also their more realistic expectations relevant to their career in the future.

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Governance, Human Resources and Service Quality in Universiti Sains Malaysia in the Pre-APEX Period

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Introduction

In conjunction with the induction of Universiti Sains Malaysia into the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) in late 2008, a study was initiated to track the changes that took place prior to (Pre-APEX), during the transformation process (During APEX), and the period thereafter (Post-APEX). Such initiative is seen as an important endeavour to document the changes and development of Universiti Sains Malaysia's experiences that can be shared within its campus community in particular and with other higher education institutions in Malaysia in general. As an effort to address the need for documentation, this present study highlights Universiti Sains Malaysia's community's readiness to meet APEX's expectation in terms of (a) Governance, (b) Human Resources, (c) and Service Quality in the Pre-APEX period.

Governance

This study examines how the Responsibility Centre (RC) [*Pusat tanggungjawab* (PTJ)] is managed and the internal control system therein. According to the Council of Sponsoring Organisations of the Treadway Commission (COSO)¹, internal control system comprises a process that is designed to provide reasonable assurance that risks are managed to ensure the achievement of an organisation's objectives in relation to the effective and efficient accomplishment of goals and operations; the safeguarding, economical and efficient use of resources; the reliability and integrity of information and the compliance with policies, plans, procedures, law and regulations (O'Leary, Iselin & Sharma, 2006). Internal control system comprises five dimensions: (1) control environment - the overall culture and practice of the top management; (2) risk assessment - the identification and measurement of an

event that could have an impact on the achievement of the RC's objectives; (3) information and communication - the capturing and dissemination of the information to all staff; (4) control activities - the policies and procedures to ensure that management directives are carried out; (5) monitoring - proper system of follow-up and follow-through to ensure that all actions agreed upon have been taken up.

“The findings indicate that the risk assessment and control activities are only slightly above average, suggesting room for improvements in this area.”

Responses from 36 personnel in Universiti Sains Malaysia's top management comprising Deans/Directors of RC, demonstrate that the top management has a clear understanding of the importance of control in an organisation. A supportive control environment is in existence and there is a proper monitoring mechanism that is used to monitor outcomes. The findings indicate that the risk assessment and control activities are only slightly above average, suggesting room for improvements in this area. Table 1 depicts the strengths and weaknesses of governance in Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Table 1 Strengths and weaknesses of governance in Universiti Sains Malaysia

Governance in Universiti Sains Malaysia	
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management ensures that staff have the skills and experience to perform their tasks. Strategic plans support the RC's objectives. Staff are encouraged to provide recommendations for improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of understanding of the concept of risk among staff. Lack of understanding about the association of risk to the achievement of RC's objectives. Lack of system to report misconduct without fear of retribution by others. Lack of policies to resolve conflict within RC.

Some of the recommendations put forth by the heads (Deans/Directors) of RC are to highlight to all staff the importance of strategies, action plans, and procedures to mitigate risk in the pursuit of RC's objectives. Staff members should be alerted to the fact that if strategies, action plans and procedures are not carried out, there will be a risk or probability that the organisation will not be able to achieve its objectives. Moreover, it was also suggested to formally establish an "ombudsman" committee to ensure that clear-cut procedures to resolve conflict are in place.

"Specifically, it is the competencies of the human resources that largely contribute to the success or failure of an organisation."

Competency of Human Resources

The present study also delved into the key competencies of both academic and administrative staff. According to Brophy and Kiely (2002), competencies are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are required to perform a role effectively. Specifically, it is the competencies of the human resources that largely contribute to the success or failure of an organisation. The competencies of human resources are seen as key resources in the organisation that can be fostered and nurtured that, in turn, affect overall performance of the organisation.

For academic staff, five competency domains were identified that are considered relevant to the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) requirement of Universiti Sains Malaysia², namely (1) teaching, (2) supervision, (3) research and publication, (4) consultancy, and (5) networking³. A survey was administered among 50 academic staff members that

require them to self-rate their own competencies. The findings revealed that Universiti Sains Malaysia academic staff rated themselves in the range of moderate to high in terms of supervision ($M=4.12$), consultancy ($M=4.10$), and teaching ($M=4.09$), followed by research and publication ($M=3.89$) and networking ($M=3.77$). In terms of self-assessed performance, the academic staff rated themselves between moderate and high.

A parallel study involving 48 administrative staff was undertaken where their competencies were measured based on six dimensions: (1) organising, (2) proactive and innovative, (3) teamwork, (4) leading, (5) problem-solving, and (6) technical competency. The results indicated that they are satisfied with their level of competency in terms of organising, leading, technical knowledge and teamwork, as well as proactive and innovative. However, there were weaknesses in problem-solving skills. Table 2 highlights the strengths and weaknesses of both academic and administrative staff who participated in this study.

Service Quality

The Service Quality dimension examined the service quality of academic staff as perceived by students and the service quality of the administrative staff as perceived by both academic staff and students. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) define service quality as perceived by consumers, stemming from the comparison of what they feel service entities should offer with their perceptions of the performance of entity providing the services. The SERVQUAL Model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which consists of five dimensions of service quality, was employed in this study. The dimensions are (1) *tangibility* - physical facilities, equipment and appearances of personnel; (2) *reliability* - ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; (3) *responsiveness* - the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; (4) *assurance* - the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; and (5) *empathy* - caring, individualised attention the entity provides to customers. In addition, *accessibility* was added due to the relevance of the dimension in this study. Based on the response from 70

Table 2 Strengths and weaknesses of human resources in Universiti Sains Malaysia

Competencies of human resources in Universiti Sains Malaysia		
	Academic Staff	Administrative Staff
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competent in teaching, supervision, research and publication and consultancy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competent in organising, leading, technical knowledge and teamwork Proactive and innovative
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of international networks and linkages Lack of international-based research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of problem solving skill

students and 46 academic staff, the strengths and weaknesses of the academic and administrative staff in terms of service quality were identified, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Strengths and weaknesses of service quality in Universiti Sains Malaysia

Service quality in Universiti Sains Malaysia		
	Academic Staff	Administrative Staff
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moderate to high in terms of reliability, empathy, tangibility, responsiveness, and assurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moderate to high in terms of tangibility, responsiveness, and assurance
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slightly low in terms of accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slightly low in terms of reliability, empathy, and accessibility

To address the issue of accessibility among academic staff, it is recommended inter alia the availability of various channels of communication to students, offer a fixed consultation period of at least two hours per week, and create more self-regulating study. In overcoming the weaknesses of administrative staff, the recommendations include establishing a client charter to increase accessibility, providing training to improve service delivery (in terms of reliability and empathy), and setting up a “suggestion and/or complaint box” for continuous feedback catering to improvement.

Conclusion

This study offers some insights into the Pre-APEX scenario of Universiti Sains Malaysia’s internal control system, human resources, and service quality. At the same time it also draws attention to the areas requiring improvement. It also documents some of the recommendations pertaining to the quality of the internal control system and the strategies to elevate the competencies of human resources and the quality of service offered. Nonetheless the findings need to be treated cautiously given the small sample size. They will be compared to the findings of the next phase of study (During-APEX) to track the changes (if any) following the implementation of a significant portion of the transformation process⁴.

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Endnote

1. The measurement of the internal control system developed by COSO model should be applicable to higher education institution as it has been validated via a focus group comprising of five heads of responsibility centres of Universiti Sains Malaysia.
2. The five dimensions of KPI measure employed in this study were validated via a focus group conducted among 15 academic staff at Universiti Sains Malaysia.
3. This is also in line with the university’s APEX agenda of nurturing and learning, research/innovation and services and external activities (*Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow*, 2008, p. 16). The competencies of the academic staff in terms of teaching, supervision, research and publication, consultancy, and networking are considered important means to achieve the APEX agenda.
4. Improvement in the governance, human resources, service quality will indirectly indicate that the APEX agenda has shown positive results.

Psychosocial Profiling of Universiti Sains Malaysia's Community towards Sustainable Health

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Introduction

When Universiti Sains Malaysia was inducted into the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) in 2008, a fast track development aimed towards recognition as a world-class institution of higher learning, the university underwent numerous transformations. Both the staff and students experienced psychosocial changes during this transformation process. Among the changes are the struggle to adapt to the change of new work culture, change of work routine, pressure of attaining certain goals and objectives in line with the APEX aspirations, and establishing new mindset (Brody, 2000).

Thus, it is critical to understand how the community respond or react to the changing work environment. Understanding such struggles will help to identify specific intervention that, in turn help the staff and students to adapt smoothly and effectively. In order to effectively monitor the mental status and well-being of the Universiti Sains Malaysia community during the critical transformation process period (from January 2010, over four time lines), the AURA-BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL team was set up to monitor and document the biopsychosocial changes among members of the Universiti Sains Malaysia community.

“Both the staff and students experienced psychosocial changes during this transformation process.”

The two main objectives of AURA-BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL research are (1) to monitor the biopsychosocial changes of individuals in Universiti Sains Malaysia aimed at ascertaining the short- and long-term impact of the transformation process on an individual functioning under APEX conditions, and (2) to explain the outcomes (positive or otherwise) in the biopsychosocial changes in individuals as well as to assess and analyse timely and strategic interventions to arrest unfavourable or even harmful impacts.

Procedure

Steps were taken to encourage the students and staff of all levels to participate in this research. Banners were displayed and road shows were carried out at the medical campus

(Kubang Kerian), engineering campus (Nibong Tebal), and at the library and chancellory on the main campus (Minden). The researchers were there to introduce and explain the purpose and the usefulness of the instruments used in this research. After the students and staff have completed the online instruments, the researchers explained their profile to them. Those interested to explore ways of coping better were referred to mentors and counsellors of the university.

Phase 1 of data collection was done from February-June 2010. In the main campus, an AURA Room was specifically set up at *Pusat Sejahtera* (Wellness Centre) for the purpose of collecting data and at the same time provide a service to anyone interested to do their profiling and to understand themselves and know their biopsychosocial status. At the present, the research is at Phase 2 (July-December 2010) of the data collection.

Instruments

Two instruments, namely New Mind Maps and Behavioural Management System (BeMIS) were used to profile the staff and students.

New Mind Maps

The New Mind Maps Instrument is an on-line comprehensive integrative system to assess the mental health status of an individual. The instrument provides the individual with his/her psychosocial profile and symptoms pertaining to physical health (Soutar, <https://www.newmind.com>, 2010). The New Mind Maps has three sections, (i) Client Physiological Profile, (ii) Interactive Self Inventory, and (iii) Symptom Check List.

Client Physiological Profile

This section provides information to help the person understand his/her physiological problems in terms of frequency and severity of the problem. Some of the symptoms are diarrhea, insomnia, headaches, back pain, weight loss, abdominal pain, visual blurring, and fatigue.

Interactive Self Inventory

This section shows the psychosocial behaviour with 134 items to measure psychosocial profile spread over 16 dimensions: *anxiety, depression, relaxed, inhibited, regulated, impulsivity, passivity, assertive, flexible, perfectionist, cooperative, competitive, independence, dependence, interactive, and avoidant*. It helps the individual identify and understand his/her scores vis-a-vis a norm. For instance, if an individual has an anxiety or depression dimension score higher than the norm, it is advisable that he/she seeks professional help.

Symptom Check List

This section tracks the eight positive symptoms of concentration, short term memory, quality of sleep, appetite, motivation/energy, positive moods, patience, and assertiveness as well as eight negative symptoms, restlessness, worry/negative thinking, negative moods, negative emotions, pain/physical, discomfort, fatigue, irritability, and impulsivity. These symptoms can be monitored over time, and the individual is encouraged to seek professional help if negative symptoms are more prevalent.

“Concomitant to the university pursuing world-class institution status, there are increased expectations of performance in terms of both quality and quantity. Such changes may have impacted on the community’s personality and psychosocial well being.”

Behavioural Management System (BeMIS)

BeMIS is another online assessment tool to profile an individual’s personality attributes. The system administers the Adjective Check List (ACL) (Measurement and Planned Development, 2010).

The ACL comprises 300 adjectives commonly utilised to describe personality. It measures six global personality features, namely *productiveness, assertiveness, sociability, individuality, well-being, and submissiveness*, and 37 personality traits, *enthusiasm, optimism, negativity, communality, achievement, dominance, endurance, order, psychologically perceptive, nurturance, affiliation, social energy, exhibition, autonomy, aggression, change, support-seeking, self-blaming, deference, counselling readiness, self-control, self-confidence, personal adjustment, self-satisfaction, creativity, structure-valuing, masculinity, femininity, fault-finding, respectful, work-centered, playful, security-seeking, affected, intellectualistic, pragmatic, and scientific.*

The individual receives a full report and a score range; for the majority the score range falls between 40 and 60. The information is useful for individuals to understand his/her specific strengths and weaknesses in order to plan strategies to strengthen the positive traits, and to act to overcome and improve on weaknesses.

Conclusion

It is crucial to systematically track the personality profiles and the psychosocial changes of the university community during the APEX transformation. Concomitant to the university pursuing world-class institution status, there are increased expectations of performance in terms of both quality and quantity. Such changes may have impacted on the community’s personality and psychosocial well being. In utilising New Mind Maps and BeMis, the AURA-BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL researchers hope to provide information to the top management of Universiti Sains Malaysia in order that appropriate measures be taken as well as the provision of relevant programmes aimed at preserving and enhancing the mental health and well being of the campus community in line with the APEX aspirations. It is also hoped that timely interventions be taken to prevent any harmful impacts. Proactive measures can be put in place to ensure positive transformation of individuals in order to enhance work performances thereby contributing towards the university’s transformation. At the same time human capital development is preserved for a sustainable tomorrow.

Besides, the research provides psychological testing service for any member of the campus community who wishes to understand himself/herself thereby allowing him/her to take action to help himself/herself. It is hoped that in future more assessment tools can be made available such as EQ test, Competency test, Behaviour Rating Inventory for Executive Function, Career Attitudes and Strategies, Neuropsychological test, and Occupational Stress Inventory to further assist to enhance the overall well being of the campus community.

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Watkins, D. (1998). A cross-cultural look at perceptions of good teaching: Asia and the West. In J. J. F. Forest (Ed.), *University teaching: International perspectives*. New York: Garland.

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