

Community Service Programmes in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Sharifah Hapsah Shahabudin

Vice-Chancellor

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)

It is very often said that the core functions of a university are to create new knowledge through research and to disseminate knowledge by imparting it through student learning, presentation at conferences and meetings as well as publications in scientific journals. The university is well organised to serve the stakeholders involved in these activities, mainly the students, academic faculty and administrators.

A third function, service to the community is often cited but appears to be less well organised at the university level. In recent years calls for greater involvement of other significant stakeholders such as the industry, professions and government in the activities of the university have spurred the university to reorganize the way it interacts with its constituents. This includes the manner in which the university interacts with interest groups in the community and society at large.

This paper attempts to describe the rationale for community partnerships, the way UKM has reorganized itself in order to mutually benefit from its interactions with and service to the community and to illustrate some university-community partnership initiatives.

Rationale for university-community partnership

Service to the community is part of the social contract whereby the university has a moral obligation to be accountable and socially responsible in return for the public funding spent on its up keeping. The social contract is fulfilled in two mutually benefiting ways. The university gains by enhancing the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the educational and research programmes through links to the 'real' society/world. The community gains through a direct engagement of the University's expertise, resources and research outputs in participatory, bottom-up, people-centered development. Partnerships with the community also serve to cement 'good neighbour' relationship where the community is also host to hundreds of the university's students which include international students.

In partnership for educational purposes the community becomes the living classroom for students to learn in a holistic manner and where their learning experience will result in a wholesome individual and responsible citizenry. The community offers a fertile environment for the development of learning outcomes envisaged in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework: application of knowledge and practical skills, social skills and responsibility, ethics, values and professionalism, communication, leadership and team skills, problem-solving and decision making, managerial and entrepreneurial skills.

In research, partnership with the community can result in better policy formulation and programmes for community development as well as application of scientific inventions in areas such as poverty eradication, health promotion, environmental conservation, and disease prevention. The partnership is fundamental in integrating research with the national innovation system which results in better capability for firms and enterprises, regional development and enhancement of the quality of life of the people.

An example is the partnership between researchers from the Solar Energy Research Institute (SERI) of UKM and a non governmental organization to install solar panels for the semi nomadic Orang Asli (indigenous people) who live in remote villages. The solar panels are used to light streets, dry food stuff and provide power for telecommunication.

Types of partnerships

There are two major types of partnerships. The first are student initiatives conducted through student associations and co curricular activities. Activities that are conducted together with the UKM Student Union are usually university initiatives which are more widespread and multidisciplinary in terms of faculty and student participation. In addition more than 80 student associations under the wings of the Student Union may conduct activities for specific constituents. Examples are the religious based student association (e.g Buddha, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim), region based associations (e.g Kedah, Kelantan, Sarawak etc), sports and culture based, academic based according to the disciplines of study (Medical, Law etc) and special themes associations (e.g Entrepreneurship, United Nations, Environment, Caring Society, HIV/AIDS, Anti Drugs etc)

The second set of initiatives are those conducted by the faculties. They are often related to the nature of the disciplines and may or may not involve students. In initiatives which involve undergraduates, there is a deliberate attempt to make the community a classroom for learning the lessons in life. In research projects postgraduate students are usually involved. Community service is given 5% in the annual staff appraisal system.

Organisation of the University-Community Partnership programmes

Since the programmes involve research, educational or student activities they may involve separate parts of the university's organisation. Realising that the community development aspects may not be well documented or followed up for impact and effectiveness, UKM has taken the step to establish a University-Community Partnership office under the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of Industry and Community Partnership¹. The office is responsible for planning and implementing multidisciplinary university level community initiatives and acts as a one-stop center for community out reach. In addition the office would serve as a coordinating and documentation center for community related initiatives conducted by the faculties, research institutes and Center for Students Development.

Examples of University-Community Partnership Initiatives

(a) Student-community service programmes (OPKIM)

With a volunteer base of over 25,000 students and 80 student associations, these programmes contribute services to communities in various areas, especially rural areas, all over the country. The activities are coordinated by the Student Affairs Division and are usually co sponsored by the relevant government agencies, corporate sector organizations and non governmental civic organisations. UKM allocates about RM 2000 per community service programme.

¹ A Deputy Vice Chancellor responsible for Community and Industry Partnership has been appointed from September 1 2007

Examples of activities

Student volunteers travel to remote / rural villages during the semester break and stay with the villages for about a week. Numerous programmes are organised annually with the Community Development Department, each involving about 40-120 students. In this programme volunteers work with villagers to repair and maintain homes, to clean the environment and to give motivational talks to children.

Healthy community programme

Organised by the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences and the Medical Student Society in conjunction with local authorities, student volunteers travel to selected areas during weekends to conduct health screening, to put up a health exhibition to promote better awareness of health issues and to provide simple counseling, health advice, physiotherapy and work environment therapy. The health screening includes tests of blood pressure, cholesterol, sugar, body fat, breast examination, ear checks, speech and hearing tests, optometry, BMI measurements, dietary and eating habits, supplement intake and mental and psychological screening. About 600 visitors turn up at each community service session. Two programmes are conducted every year run by about 200 students in Allied Health (about 1600 hours of community service).

Youth Companion Programmes involve students in youth development programmes in various parts of the country. The programme is co sponsored by the Youths and Sports Ministry with the aim of promoting youth activities under the national Rakan Muda programme (e.g Say No to Drugs). Groups of 40 students spend about a week on these programmes.

Co curricular activities

The Co-curriculum Centre conducts a course on Community Service where 1 credit out of 2 credits is given for practical work in the community. It was first

introduced in 2005 to encourage volunteerism among university students. The average enrolment per semester is 900 students. The activities are conducted in selected sites.

Faculty Initiatives

The Menara Gading or "Ivory Tower" Project by the Faculty of Education is aimed at motivating low income marginalised rural high school children in the state of Pahang to aspire for higher education. It is sponsored by the Raja Abdul Aziz Palace Foundation. In this project students are brought to study camps where they participate in sessions aimed at improving their attitudes and motivation towards learning, at enhancing their time management skills and self concept as well as to learn how to concentrate, reduce anxiety, improve their information processing techniques and to self evaluate in preparation for examinations. To date the project has been 98% successful in placing students into higher education.

The health services project at HUKM provide many opportunities for university-community partnership. Two examples are the partnership with the Malaysian Cancer Council (MAKNA) to provide free/low cost treatment to children with leukemia. The other is the Cochlear Implant programme with Yayasan Budi Penyayang (Caring Society) which has enabled more than 160 children who are born deaf to hear and develop speech. They are now attending normal schools and some are in colleges and universities.

University initiatives: Village Adoption project

Kundang Hulu is a village in Pagoh, Johor which was badly hit by the floods in early 1997. More than 1000 UKM students volunteered to help in the clean up of the Pagoh area. They travelled over several weekends, staying overnight to

clean up schools, places of worship, community centers and homes. Impressed and grateful for the spirit of volunteerism, the head of the village of Kundang Hulu asked to be adopted by UKM so that they could benefit from a comprehensive development plan. Several faculties have gone to survey the needs at the village. A comprehensive plan for community development which looks at poverty eradication, health promotion, environmental conservation, and disease prevention is being handled by the university-community partnership office.

Conclusion

University-community initiatives are valuable in instilling social responsibility and accountability in pursuit of a bottom-up approach to community development. For students, the community provides a real-life experience for developing leadership, organizational ability, team spirit and responsibility. In Malaysia the community is also a classroom for interethnic respect and valuing of cultural diversity. The community benefits from the expertise, resources and research output for its comprehensive development. To be effective the university needs to reorganize the way it interacts with the community and society at large as well as make it count in the staff appraisal and student credit.

Floods in Johore, January 2007

