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Professional Development of Student Affairs Practitioners : a Malaysian Perspective

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS : A MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The Division of Student Affairs (DSA) in Malaysian Universities has its legitimacy from a legal framework in the University and University Colleges Act 1971 (UJCA, 1971) and UUCA 1975 (Amendment). Historically, the main function and core responsibility of the DSA was to supervise and regulate student bodies and their activities.

It primarily engaged itself in a 'policing' role as well as playing the role of the disciplinary authority of campus. Therefore, personnel development was centered around the particular niche areas as stated above. The administrative structure too was customized accordingly.

It must be mentioned, from the beginning, on-the-job training for student affairs personnel has been the main method of training used, supplemented by short courses for specific niche areas e.g. counseling, drafting of statutes, leadership etc. This has been seen as adequate as duties and functions of student affairs personnel were seen from an administrative perspective.

However, the higher education scenario is very different now. Dramatic changes have taken place since the 1990s' in the educational landscape of the country.

Undergraduate student population has grown almost four-fold with a very diverse, heterogeneous population. The open educational policy has brought about

changes to the student demography. More matured students, those with working experience and those in service have access to higher education in most tertiary institutions. The process of internationalization has also contributed to international students (undergraduate) presence in campus, adding to the complexity of governing students.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has instructed the public universities to impart 'soft skills' such as protocol, etiquette, entrepreneurship, communication, language etc. to the undergraduate population. In addition, the MOHE is currently conducting workshops to facilitate public universities to accredit extracurricular activities in order to recognize and provide incentives for students who engage in activities in a non-formal framework.

Co-curriculum courses were also initiated by the DSA as a degree requirement ranging from event management, sports activities and culture linked skills like batik printing and playing of traditional instruments. These activities have been included to further enrich as well as equip students in line with the Malaysian educational emphasis of developing a holistic person i.e. the total development of the student - physically, psychologically, intellectually, morally and spiritually.

As it can be seen the DSA role now is to play a crucial role to spearhead, initiate and facilitate non-formal education on campuses.

Another important development has been the recognition and status of research universities. The DSA, University of Malaya is in particular currently encouraging student activities to have a research component appropriate so as to further inculcate a research mindset during students' undergraduate programs, so as to contribute to the overall achievement and progress of a research university. All these changes and innovations have further heightened and sensitized the university management to strategize and review personnel training needs and hence draw up a far more comprehensive, sustainable and dynamic approach for personnel

development and in particular DSA personnel who have been entrusted with new and pioneering with roles and responsibilities of shaping young minds as well as keeping in mind the marketability of their graduates.

One of the preliminary and on-going strategy is an effort by the secretariat of Deputy Vice - Chancellor of public universities to streamline and synergize besides providing a platform for DSA personnel from the respective universities to formulate training programs and share their common experiences in terms of student needs besides understanding current challenges and issues they face.

Most DSAs' have their weekly as well as monthly in-house work sessions. Although the main thrust of these sessions are 'house-keeping', duty assignment and decision making, is also used as an opportunity for problem-solving, getting consensus on student project, reviewing and creating an awareness for personnel to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

An important development of DSA personnel is that an increasing number of senior personnel have been given opportunities to pursue post - graduate programs. This has resulted in DSA personnel being competent and qualified to conduct a range of courses and programs for undergraduate students such as career guidance, interview sessions, resume writing, financial management, organizational development, public speaking etc.

Another advantage is DSA's internship programs whereby new DSA personnel are placed under the direct supervision of senior personnel.

This results in sharing of valuable experience and insights into the working of the DSA among its personnel thus increasing productivity and teamwork.

DSA personnel are also sent for courses organized by the University especially in the areas of coaching, mentoring, public relations, leadership, writing, negotiation, conflict resolution and other essential skills pertaining to student affairs.

The commitment of the University management can also be gauged by its sponsoring of foreign fact-finding and learning trips to other well reputed and older institutions. This gives added exposure as well as opportunities for adaptation of 'best practices' as in the case of University of Malaya in terms of management of tuition fees, shuttle bus services and one - stop student centre.

DSA also realizes its limited resources especially in terms of its limited personnel to ensure an efficient and effective delivery system of its services. Hence, Universities have either privatized or outsourced some of these services. However in the case of University of Malaya, a work-study plan is being proposed whereby suitable post-graduate students can be employed on a part-time basis in DSA as well as in faculty. It is hoped that this will further strengthen personnel support for student services.

Another DSA strategy is to engage faculty members to assist in carrying out its responsibilities by way of the residential halls which are headed by academics with the assistance of fellows. Over the years DSA has managed to work with residential halls to provide guidance and training for students. This is especially so in the case of orientation programs for new students. Masters and fellows of residential halls are given appropriate training to conduct programs during orientation week as well as to deal with issues and concerns faced by new students.

It is very clear that DSAs' have over the years taken on added and more challenging roles and responsibilities, and the trend seems to be in that direction. Therefore, it is imperative for DSAs' to pursue training and professional development of student affairs personnel in order to be a significant contributor towards a holistic development of students.