

KEYNOTE ADDRESS 5

SUSTAINABLE EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

By

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Our young people today are growing up in an increasingly competitive and globalized world. Issues of globalization which also impinge on technological advancements, creation of a knowledge based society, cultural and religious tolerance all have impacts on our lives. Economic globalization for example has impacted the employment structure in our country with the influx of foreign workers doing the jobs traditionally done by the locals. It is therefore important that students be made aware of this phenomena and its effects on society and the individual. To allow them to be ignorant of the challenges it brings is depriving them of the knowledge and skills that would prepare them for the life they are going to face in the future. Schooling must be able to provide the necessary environment to develop the appropriate competence for the increasingly competitive world.

Innovation and Education

Fullan (2001) believes that educational innovation always begins with the classroom and this is closely linked to what teachers think and do with the students. Education is expected to develop literacy among students as a platform for economic survival, to create skilled workers for human resource requirements, to develop students to achieve their fullest potentials, to create tolerance amongst individuals so that they can live in harmony amidst citizens of different cultures and religions, to cultivate democratic sensitivity in a society characterized by multi- ethnicity and multi political ideology, to build nationhood in the aftermath of conflicts and to keep a nation economically competitive. In most situations it is teachers more than anybody else who are expected to take the above responsibilities and develop the capacity to innovate among the young, a capacity that is so essential for socio-economic progress of a country.

A University is the final formal educational institution where nurturing and consolidation of skills as well as knowledge and experience that students have already acquired throughout their schooling are enhanced. It is also the place where they can start to apply all that they have accumulated over the years under the guidance of their tutors. It is a place where they seek new discoveries. As university students, they should be able to portray the image of highly motivated individuals with the necessary requisites to become outstanding in their own fields of study. Their tutors are expected to be both focused on producing quality graduates as well as be well connected with the world outside the university so that what they deliver in their classes is always relevant.

The Need for Innovation

People innovate for various reasons as innovations are often linked to efforts at improvement. It normally signifies a change from existing practice. The following are three factors that I believe are relevant in creating innovations.

- a. Response to technological advancement – this is particularly true where technology has proved to create greater efficiency – both in terms of human resource, time and money. ICT has proven to have a great impact on modernization and its use has become part of our professional and private life. A person who is not computer savvy for example would be at a disadvantage in modern management. Even the people in the village would need to be literate in ICT and able to use the Internet if the concept of a knowledge based economy is to be applied. For example, new findings in

- agriculture or information on prices of agricultural products posted on the Internet can benefit a farmer in any village.
- b. Innovations can also be initiated when there is a change in leadership. New leaders sometimes bring new ideas that may have been successfully applied somewhere else or may just be freshly developed. We see a lot of these innovations in school improvement initiatives in our system. And I am informed that some new leadership have been successful in turning around schools with poor performance.
 - c. New and recent phenomena such as globalization and the emergence of knowledge based economy are also catalysts in bringing about innovations. Such phenomena requires the development of human capital in order to increase the supply of highly skilled and knowledgeable manpower that can steer the country towards achieving developed nation status. Malaysia's Vision 2020 calls for the need to create human resource that is resilient, competitive, innovative, disciplined, moral, ethical and caring. Policies are now in place to ensure changes in pedagogy from teacher centered to student-centered education, the application of ICT in teaching and learning; the emphasis on creative and critical thinking at all levels of education and the introduction of new subjects in line with the current and future needs of the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The University of Malaya itself is undergoing some changes in response to the need to be competitive and to attain a world class status. Furthermore, we have been classified as a research University and that means, inter alia, that all faculties need to refocus their priorities. To be competitive we have to find our own niche. We need to be original in our ideas so that we can sustain and maintain the research University status accorded to us. New frontiers have to be explored in all fields and programs offered at the University. For most this would imply a change of focus from teaching only to that of teaching, research and publishing. The government has made available increased research grants, which really shows a strong support for research and publication. The University of Malaya is excited that members of the academic staff have taken advantage of this opportunity to increase further their contributions to education by creating new knowledge in their respective fields. Networks have been established with reputable universities in other countries to allow for collaboration of ideas, technology and information that could enrich the university's work. UM has an academic community that is willing and committed to try out new ideas whether it is adopted, adapted or created by us.

Issues and Prospects

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Innovations will continue to be created from time to time as we strive for improvement. It is acknowledged that innovation which most of the time involves change is not as easily acceptable as one would like. Especially so if it is seen as a threat to existing practice and work culture. Even if the innovation is credible, desirable to the majority, believed to bring benefits to students and eventually to the country, it may still not be free of issues and problems. There will be sections of the staff that will oppose change. This can sometimes hamper efforts at improvement or at the best delay it. Nevertheless, issues and problems must be confronted with optimism rather than pessimism and people associated with innovations either as initiators or receivers need to be assured of the benefits of the innovation. Otherwise they will end up disillusioned. Some of those issues and problems are discussed below:

1. Innovators generally lead a lonely life. Lonely because, they are usually eyed with suspicion, sometimes frowned upon while colleagues disassociate themselves from them. This is because innovation is always associated with extra work, disruption of routine, changes in control and power relationships. Unless and until the institutional management or some other influential personnel initiates the adoption process by the

masses the innovators will continue to be left on their own. The need then is for a strong leadership acceptable by the academic who has the capacity to attract other academic staff to rally behind the principal innovator. Such leadership must be able to point out the discrepancies between the current situation and new needs for example between what is being taught with what is required by employers.

2. Innovators also comprise about 2.5% of the total population. This estimate is based on Roger's (1995) classification of adopters of innovation on the basis of the time taken by people to adopt an innovation. This classification groups adopters of innovation into five, namely innovators 2.5%, early adopters 13.5%, early majority 34%, late majority 34% and laggards 16%. If this is applied to an institution that has 100 staff, the number of innovators then translates into 2.5 persons, which is indeed very small. In such a situation, it is possible that decisions sometimes are unduly influenced by members of staff who have strong opinions against the innovation. Our cultural courtesy dictates that sometimes strong opinions voiced out by outspoken individuals do not get contradicted even when they are wrong. So how does one ensure that such likelihood does not happen? One possibility is to utilize the next group of adopters which Rogers classifies as 'early adopters'. This group is characterized as 'willing to try out new ideas' encompasses those who themselves are also informed and can be engaged in a debate over the innovation. They can conduct more meaningful discussions and provide solutions because they themselves are convinced by the innovation and perhaps have tried out the innovation themselves. They can act as change agents and influence others to adopt the innovation.
3. Our own experience in introducing educational innovations demonstrate the need to really spend some efforts in thinking through the implementation process. Factors that act as barriers to as well as support the innovation must be examined so that there is a smooth implementation of the innovation. Several of the innovations implemented in the educational system have met with less enthusiasm after the first initial adoption. In other words the thrill and excitement of being part of an innovation cannot be sustained after a certain period particularly when there is a change in leadership even though the innovation is recognized by everyone concerned as something desirable. The weakness here is the mistake of associating individuals with the innovation such that once the person leaves the system through retirement or transfer to another organization, the whole system collapses. Hence we need to ensure that as many people affected by the innovation are involved and that they matter in the success of the innovation. Ownership of the innovation by the group or the team is vital.
4. The designation of University of Malaya as a research university provides a favorable and conducive environment for a prolific growth of research studies that lead to the birth of innovations. As stated earlier, the amount of research grant has also increased. This research grant can be utilized for research into new ideas and new ways that can improve classroom practice. In fact the Faculty of Education should be a test-bed of such ventures. As the main faculty that produces teachers as well as initiating the professional upgrading of educators, the Faculty should take the lead in thinking through the most effective and innovative teaching methods and approaches. Members of the faculty should see themselves as the originators of classroom innovation in their own teaching. UM has much better library resources and facilities than any schools or universities in this country and in fact the networks with leading universities in other countries should be able to provide cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences.
5. Competitiveness for students is one of the challenges faced by a university. All universities want to attract the best students. Hence it is critical that programs and courses offered must be attractive to both students and the job market. Programs need to be academically strong, current, relevant to the labour market, have the best teaching in higher education, and the most up - to - date technology. These will assist prospective students in seeking for places of employment. Of course there are other

factors that influence student choices such as flexibility of delivery, hours required in campus, how easy/difficult it is to pass and facilities offered. Hence in order to remain competitive and in the priority list of choice university for students, faculty staff must consistently search for alternative ways of designing and delivering programs. Of course there is the risk of being labeled as bold and non-mainstream but conviction in one's ideas can sometimes prove successful. Anyway, universities are meant to be bold and non-mainstream, that is, innovative.

Conclusion

New ideas and new practices in education are of utmost importance as we move into an increasingly competitive world. Beginning with the school right up to the university, both the leadership and the teaching staff must be ready and willing to try new ways of delivery. Issues and challenges that arise should be addressed with optimism and one must believe that problems do have solutions. In fact the very search for a successful solution is itself an innovation.