Research Methodology as Core Curriculum for General Studies

AHMAD ZAMRI MANSOR & ROZITA IBRAHIM

ABSTRAK

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia mentakrifkan pengajian umum sebagai sebuah program yang menawarkan para pelajar peringkat prasiswazah bertujuan membekalkan mereka dengan kemahiran untuk hidup dalam masyarakat moden. Salah satu objektif pengajian umum ialah bagi memperlengkap pelajar dengan kemahiran menganalisis dalam penyelidikan. Bagaimanapun kemahiran ini tidak ditekankan dengan serious. Sesuai dengan statusnya sebagai sebuah universiti penyelidikan, objektif ini perluah diberikan perhatian. Makalah ini menekankan kepentingan memasukkan subjek kaedah penyelidikan dalam kurikulum pengajian umum. Makalah ini mencadangkan strategi berikut: (a) memasukkan kaedah penyelidikan dalam pengajaran pengajian umum. (b) menawarkan kursus kaedah penyelidikan pada tahap pra dan pasca siswazah. (c) meletakkan dan memajukan Pusat Pengajian Umum, UKM sebagai tempat rujukan penting dalam hal kaedah penyelidikan.

Keywords: research university--general education curriculum--research methodology--teaching and learning in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the need to incorporate research skills into general education curriculum for undergraduate students at research universities. In this paper, we focus on the case of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). We argue that research skills can be inculcated through the introduction of Research Methodology courses and that can be managed under the Centre for General Studies (PPU). By research, we mean the "systematic way of asking questions" or "a systematic method of enquiry" (Drew, 1980:4) and the purpose is to expand knowledge, to solve problems and more importantly is to find the truth. The research that we are referring to in this paper is the social science research. Punch (2005:8) notes that the general term "social science" refers to "the scientific study of human behaviour". He further explains that the word
“social” refers to people and their behaviour, and to the fact that so much of that behaviour occurs in a social context. On the other hand, “science” refers to the way that people and their behaviour are studied.

We suggest that research as a systematic process of inquiry can contribute towards achieving the aims of general education, i.e. to inculcate skills and develop the intellect. Students equipped with these capabilities are hoped to contribute as good members of the society. In this regard, we feel that Drew’s (1980:10) notes on his personal experience as a researcher capture the essence of our objective in incorporating research skills into general education curriculum:

As the years have passed, I have begun to appreciate other personal benefits of conducting research. As a researcher, a natural part of the process is writing. Clearly, the expression of thoughts, ideas, and findings, in writing. This is one the most demanding tasks a person can undertake. It requires a completeness and clarity of communication that is simply not involved in routine conversation. … It is very challenging for most people to write in an articulate fashion. Despite the struggle that is often involved, a great deal of satisfaction accompanies the completion of a particular piece of research. The entire research process, from designing the study to writing the report, can be one of the most growth-producing experiences available. Each step requires the exercise of disciplined thought balanced with an appropriate dose of creativity.

In what follows, we will discuss our proposition for including research skills as one of the objectives of general education in UKM. Before further discussing our proposition, let us provide an overview of general education in UKM and the importance of re-branding PPU in order to better suit the current status of UKM as a research university.

GENERAL EDUCATION IN UKM

General education in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has a long history. The concept of general or liberal education was outlined in UKM’s establishment documents back in 1969 (Shaharir Mohamad Zain, 1994). The need for a general education at the university level echoes the statement in the National Education Policy that envisions a broad and balanced education that goes hand in hand with students’ specialisation areas (Anuwar Ali, 1998). Hence, while the faculties provide their students with specialised knowledge, general education equips them with necessary knowledge and skills to function as a learned and functional member of the society. Syed Hussien Alatas (1998: 19) maintains that the goals of general education "are not to develop a career but to develop the total personality. It is not the intention to teach a little of everything but to teach
enough of certain things”. Those “certain things” are related to the demands of our times and should be moulded according to the Malaysian perspectives (Syed Hussien Alatas, 1998; Kadir H. Din, 1998; Kadir H. Din, 2010; Mohd. Hazim Shah, 1998; and Robiah Sidin & Nor Azizah Salleh, 1998).

The question is how do we translate these noble intentions of general education at UKM? What are the required courses that can fulfil the demands of our time? In the case of UKM, general education is a compulsory requirement to be fulfilled by all UKM students before they can graduate. In terms of administration, general education courses at UKM are offered and managed by the Centre for General Studies (PPU). At this university, general education is formally defined as “a programme that aims to provide undergraduate students with basic knowledge that are required to live in a modern society” (Pusat Pengajian Umum, 2010). The objectives of general education in UKM are (1) understanding of noble values and appreciation of history and responsibilities in the society, (2) knowledge of quantitative and communication skills, (3) breadth of knowledge, and (4) language competencies. These four objectives are acknowledged as components that make a person an intellectual person, who is able to make meaningful contribution to the society.

However, we sense that the components of general education as stated above is lacking in terms of emphasis on the ability of conducting intellectual inquiry, i.e. how to do research. We contend that the ability to conduct intellectual inquiry is an important knowledge that an educated person should have, so that he or she should be able to seek the truth (which remains the main purpose of any inquiry). The closest objective of general education that supports what we are proposing is the second objective, i.e. “knowledge of quantitative and communication skills”. This is however not good enough as we need an emphatically worded objective that endorses the incorporation of research methodology as one of the cores of general education curriculum. From our review of older documents (Kadir H. Din & Mus Chairil Samani, 1998; Pusat Pengajian Umum, 2001) related to the objectives of general studies in PPU, we realised that the objective does not confine to quantitative skills only but more importantly is to know how to think critically and creatively. Therefore we feel that the spirit of the old days is gone. In the old days, the spirit is to inculcate creativity and critical minds so that they are able to think as an intellectual men and women. Now, the focus is more towards communication and organisational skills. In other words the shift has been from inculcating a “thinking person” to the one that can perform well in an organisation. Hence, the question, “where has the thinking component gone?” is a valid concern for everyone.
In light of UKM status as a research university (Sharifah Hapsah, 2008), it is high time for us to address the above mentioned issue and align it with the development of general education at this university. In this paper, we suggest that the “thinking component” can now be integrated in Research Methodology courses under the general education curriculum. Since PPU students include undergraduates from all faculties in UKM, the whole university can benefit from this course. Through this course, students are exposed to doing real research as well as developing transferable skills related to the research activities. According to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom, in doing research, two basic skills are required (Hart, 2002). Firstly, core skills and abilities that are common for all researchers from various disciplines. The academic skills and expertise common to all subject fields within the social sciences can be grouped as (1) Literature search and evaluation, (2) research design and strategy, and (3) writing and presenting. The second skill relates to the ability to integrate theory and methods. This involves understanding of the interrelationship between theory, method and research design, practical skills and particular methods, the knowledge base of the subject and methodological foundations.

Research skills are particularly crucial during contemporary period of expanding education and information. The development of information technology (IT) has changed the university environment where the academic libraries are now becoming “gateways to information rather than storehouses of knowledge”, while education and researches are becoming cross-disciplinary in nature (Hart, 2002). These changes call for researchers to adopt a flexible attitude to knowledge, and develop broader skills and knowledge bases. Hart argues that researchers as well as students need to acquire a set of personal transferable skills that include some basic elements of communication, such as writing reports, making presentations and negotiating. Hart further suggested that undergraduate and postgraduate research as an ideal opportunity for such personal transferable skills to be acquired and developed. For example, he said, in doing literature review for a research, students are exposed to a whole spectrum of skills including time management, organisation of materials, computer use, information handling, on-line searching and writing. Similar to Hart’s opinion, Habibah, Hamzah & Amriah (2011) share their views on how research through field work managed to nurture research culture and developed students’ skills in teamwork, leadership, communication and personal skills. Habibah, Hamzah & Amriah (2011) also quoted that undergraduates’ engagement in research has desirable impacts on the students themselves, the university as well as the nation at large. They maintained that research facilitate students’ learning and enhance
their personal development thus better prepare them for future career. At the university and national level, development of research serves as an indicator of progress and economic competitiveness.

PPU AND RESEARCH UNIVERSITY STATUS

In 2006, UKM has been categorised as a research university together with three other public universities, namely Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) (MoHE, 2007). All research universities are expected to engage in active exploration of new ideas, experimentation of innovative methods and ventures into intellectual initiatives with the aim of furthering and expanding the knowledge frontier. Research universities function as a catalyst for the nation economic growth, and consequently enhancing the quality of the citizens.

This recent development as UKM advances into a research intensive university calls for a ‘rebranding’ of PPU to be better suited into the whole university ecosystem. The question is how do we do this? We suggest that one of the contributions comes in the form of equipping students with research skills. We argue that, at a research university, research skills should be made an essential competency to be mastered, or at least introduced, to all undergraduate and postgraduate students. By doing this, research culture will be inculcated to all students and not only academics of the university. This is hoped to create a healthy intellectual environment where students and academics are engaged in the process of exploring new knowledge and advancing existing knowledge to a new height. This also enhances our aim of ‘creating’ an individual who would be able to make meaningful contributions to the society. The need to rebrand PPU in order to align it with UKM’s aspiration and strategies has to be designed. The task is not to do cosmetic changes, i.e. by only offering courses but also involves a paradigm shift, i.e. we as a centre of excellence in teaching of research methodology. Among the proposed strategies are:

Strategy 1: To incorporate research methodology as a core curriculum in general studies.

Strategy 2: To offer research courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Strategy 3: To build expertise in research methods.

Strategy 4: To project ourselves as a centre of excellence in research methodology teaching and research.

Each of these will be elaborated throughout the paper.
STRATEGY I: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

To incorporate a ‘Research Methodology’ course in the general education curriculum, firstly we need to acknowledge it as one of the cores. What is needed is to have a specific objective. To see how it differs from the current objectives, let us refer to the table below. The suggested objectives have an additional component, i.e. the research skill component.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE CURRENT OBJECTIVES</th>
<th>THE SUGGESTED OBJECTIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating noble values</td>
<td>Appreciating noble values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational skills</td>
<td>Organisational skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breadth of knowledge</td>
<td>Research skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language competency</td>
<td>Breadth of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English language competency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One question that one might be tempted to ask is - “Is research skills component a part of general studies?” The answer is a resounding yes. General education has certain characteristics, of which three deserve our attention here. The first one is it must be preparatory, in the sense that it must prepare the students for their future life. The second characteristic is that general education should be concerned with the whole human being. The object of the education is the human being or the person, not the lesson itself. A teacher teaches the human being, i.e. the students, and not the subject. In this regard, our aim is to prepare them with intellectual inquiry skills, i.e. the research skills. With this we hope to enhance their inquisitive minds, thus developing their intellectual capabilities. The third characteristic of general education is that it serves the purposes of the society. In this regard, we should concern with the interest of our university. As UKM is in the era of a research university status, this purpose should also be reflected in the objectives of PPU. The general aim of general education is of course, not to produce a chemist, psychologist or scientist but a good chemist, a good psychologist and a good scientist. The adjective of “good” in the professions mentioned should reflect his or her ability to engage in “intellectual” inquiry.
STRATEGY 2: OFFERING RESEARCH METHOD COURSES

To pursue our objective of being centre of excellence in teaching of research method, the very first strategies that we would like to propose is the creation of a number of related courses at undergraduate as well as postgraduate levels. For undergraduate level, we propose the creation of a generic research skills course which covers the following areas:

1. Research process;
2. Developing research proposal;
3. Conducting literature review;
4. Developing and analysing questionnaire;
5. Interviewing respondents;
6. Writing style; and
7. Research ethics.

The research skills course that we propose serves to expose the students to the process of research as well as guiding them on how to do research in an academic as well as workplace settings. For postgraduate levels, the courses should be tailored to meet their academic needs. In the beginning, we could start with three basic courses:

1. Research Methodology;
2. Statistical Research Methods; and
3. Qualitative Research Methods.

Research Methodology is a basic course in conducting research, focusing on process and purpose of research, literature review, data analysis and so on. For Statistical Research Methods, the areas should consist of sampling, SPSS techniques and so on. For Qualitative Research Methods, syllabus should include, the nature of qualitative inquiry, how it is differs from quantitative research, correlates in qualitative paradigms, data collection method such as in-depth interviews, observation, focus group interview, data analysis techniques and so on. Other courses such as Action Research can also be offered when situation necessitates.

STRATEGY 3: BUILDING EXPERTISE IN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To offer the courses, we need to have our own expertise not only to teach research method courses but also to serve our overall aspiration, i.e. to be a centre of
excellence in research method teaching. Apart from building expertise from the academicians in PPU and UKM, experts from other universities should also be hired. Each of our academicians, apart from having content expertise, must also have at least have a methodological specialisation. Examples of the content expertise are Islamic studies, environmental management, educational policies, whereas for the methodological expertise, the options are between quantitative and qualitative methods.

**STRATEGY 4: DRIVE TOWARDS A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY TEACHING**

Strategy 4 is our ultimate aim. It represents our inspiration to transform or rebrand PPU to positively be responsive to the UKM pledge as a research university. We have learned from the past that as we have the sacred tag “Pusat” in our name of Pusat Pengajian Umum, thus, administratively speaking, we are not designed to offer programmes. The opportunity to contribute emerges in the form of transforming PPU to offer courses in research methods and eventually become a “centre of excellence” in research method teaching. The very word “centre of excellence” entails the newfound role of PPU as a reference centre for research method teaching. The corpus of knowledge on research method will be further expanded and of course, with a local mould.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Change in inevitable. An organisation needs to learn and unlearn, as embodied in the notion of learning organisation. To change for the better, one needs to see what has been going on outside the organisation (the external environment). The current trend is a positive one, towards fulfilling UKM’s role as a research university status and “knowledge ecosystem” (Sharifah Hapsah, 2009). One needs to ask his or herself, “What is our contribution to this (UKM as a research university)?”. The strategies proposed are specially thought in order to promote PPU to excel in the future. The push towards this is not an easy one. This paper represents the very first step towards that.
REFERENCES


Ahmad Zamri Mansor & Rozita Ibrahim
Centre for General Studies
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
azamri@ukm.my & eta@ukm.my