The Role of the Regional Centre of Expertise in Human Resource Development for a Sustainable Society: “University of RCE”

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An RCE is unique in its transdisciplinary nature of nurturing and encouraging learning processes while simultaneously enabling a multi-stakeholder engagement platform. Such distinctive traits enable an RCE to function as the best platform through which to address common problems in current approaches to human resources development that are more often than not segmented and incomprehensive. Because real-life issues and complications that occur in everyday living are not categorized or resolved through such discipline-based approaches, it is quite clear that the public and members of society should undergo a certain competence developing stage in their lives whereby the conventional discipline-based learning process is discontinued and new, more relevant skills taught via a new learning platform.

“University of RCE” is an idea that envisions the functions of an RCE as an “ideal” university that facilitates and provides learning and research opportunities for all existing components of society. Society in its entirety encompasses diverse stakeholders and various levels of interactions between these stakeholders thus bringing about an environment that facilitates the lifelong learning development process of the human resource. It is hoped that through this process, citizens will acquire the competencies that are needed in order to secure their roles as positive, productive members of society and of the world at large, thus fulfilling the main objective of ESD. Ultimately, the community is empowered leading to the creation of a sustainable society.

This article draws from the experiences of RCE Penang@USM, an institution that has been in operation for the past 5 years. RCE Penang is currently re-synergizing the many different stakeholders that are involved in its network and is led by Universiti Sains Malaysia, which has adopted an inside-out approach in the implementation of its ESD strategies.

Keywords: community empowerment, non-formal/informal education, education for sustainable development

Introduction

Education and learning processes have evolved in their approaches and contents over the past few years. In light of this, various studies have been conducted in an attempt to establish and devise methods in which the learning process can be made as optimal as possible to the learner. Some of the more debated-about concepts are social learning, transformative learning and action research which seek to fundamentally integrate as many levels and actors as possible while delinking and demystifying education and learning from conventional teaching concepts. Some learning methods even endeavor to replace teaching (which supposedly connotes a one way process) to nurturing, as they perceive nurturing to be a reflection of education as a continuously engaging process.

The introduction of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has brought in a new impetus in terms of the search for novel approaches in the education process while simultaneously reinstating previous claims on learning purposes. Delors et al (1996) suggest that “Learning: the Treasure Within,” that the ultimate goals of learning should be learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. These are pertinent examples of structures that could be utilized to determine learning in the 21st century.

Education processes are also subject to certain evolutionary transformations in the pursuit for the
best learning environment. The traditional class-based learning method has been criticized for being overly rigid which in turn set off field work-based approaches to learning, but these were then condemned for their minimal learning outcomes due to insufficient linkages and proper reflections to the classroom setting. Given these challenges, this paper will seek to illustrate the potential of Regional Centers of Expertise in their function as optimal learning platforms – not dissimilar to universities, especially in the context of educating and developing human resources who are literate in sustainability and sustainable development issues.

Development of Human Resources for Sustainable Development – Redefining the Needs and Approach

The development of human resources in the sustainability or sustainable development context is an area that has resulted in intense debate over the search for linkages between the nature and process of capacity building and its specific areas of specialization. Unlike other areas of specialization, the integration of sustainable development knowledge and skills into an individual’s psyche is markedly more challenging. The development of human resources is composed of several stages and critical areas. In each stage, commonly applied developmental frameworks for human resources such as training, team building and leadership need to be orientated or re-orientated. Such changes must occur in all three areas of strategy, content and approach, on top of the need for a conducive environment due to the needs of the SD stream, which has brought with it a new kind of capacity need in addressing the development of human resources.

There are at least three (3) strategies which have been identified as critical in developing human resources for sustainable development, namely:

- Raising awareness and interest in sustainable development
- Deepening knowledge and understanding on sustainable development
- Embedding the concept of sustainable development in society’s psyche

Organizations usually develop company-specific awareness components in its human resource development component, with a large number of these awareness elements overlapping with sustainability or sustainable development needs such as equal opportunities, concern for participatory decision making process, etc. Therefore, the reorientation of HRD for sustainability would mean inculcating among trained personnel a greater level of awareness with regard to environmental consciousness and responsibility. That being said, a number of individuals may already be aware of the importance of furthering their knowledge and increasing their understanding of these issues to a higher level where they can voluntarily act in conformity with sustainability principles and practices. To this end, the organization’s learning environment must be in continuity with societal reality. This is where the third strategy mentioned earlier comes into play. In addition to this, the third strategy also plays the vital role of enabling a suitable environment in order to provide continuous development opportunities for human resources. Once these strategies are in place, not only will the individuals in question be prepared to meet the requirements of their organizations but they will also be members of society who harbor concern for sustainable development needs.

With regard to content, conventional emphases on the development of human resources are not immediately associated with an emphasis on knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors. Many training practices aim at developing only the specific skills that are required by the organization rather than prepare individuals for the needs of their daily lives. In comparison, educating human resources for sustainable development requires that all five (5) components are inculcated in a rigorous manner based on the belief that changes which are needed in organizations are also relevant to the changes that need to happen in society.

One of the more challenging aspects of education regardless of its purpose is to construct a suitable and appropriate learning environment, given the difficulties in optimizing the learning
process. This is because the entities of learning correspond directly to their respective boundaries of influence. As an example, the education process in a university environment is usually confined to issues that are relevant to the university. Similarly, every other organizational learning process is limited to such boundaries. It is exceedingly important that individuals are aware of the need to not only be upstanding members of their respective corporate worlds but also be productive upstanding members of society as well. This again reiterates the point of societal relevancy in that the learning environment in companies must reflect societal reality in order to maintain relevancy in both regards.

In conclusion, what is needed in the context of sustainable development education for human resources is a paradigm shift in the purpose and approach of human resource development to ensure that it not only meets the needs of the organization but also that of the society in which the organization operates.

RCEs as a Unique Human Resource Development Platform – “University of RCE”

An RCE is unique in its transdisciplinary nature of nurturing and encouraging learning processes while simultaneously enabling a multi-stakeholder engagement platform. Such distinctive traits enable an RCE to function as the best platform through which to address common problems in current human resource development approaches that are more often than not segmented and incomprehensive. Because real-life issues and complications that occur in everyday living are not categorized or resolved through such discipline-based approaches, it is quite clear that the public and members of society should undergo a certain competence-developing stage in their lives whereby the conventional discipline-based learning process is discontinued and new, more relevant skills taught via a new learning platform.

As argued above, the development process of human resources has to occur continuously for life. Companies face the difficult task of un-learning and recreating links because there is a well-established misconception that the development of human resources is the sole responsibility of the employing company.

RCEs are a network of partnerships that allow for different knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to interact - either to generate a pre-discussed action or to foster better understandings among partnering institutions. It is defined as an innovative platform for dialogues and a learning-focused network that spans across knowledge and sectoral boundaries (UNU-IAS, 2010). As of such, RCEs provide both the opportunity to evaluate the competency of human resources acquired beforehand as well as the venue in which to further develop human resources with attention given to societal relevance. In addition to this, RCEs also function as a critical test-bed for transdisciplinary perspectives which will in turn challenge the discipline-based thinking of individuals.

The development of human resources in this era of rapid change and tremendous needs and pressure for sustainable development mainstreaming obviously require “thinking outside the box” approaches that couple comprehensive perspectives which extend beyond respective organizational needs alone. Sustainability as we understand it encompasses three levels: the individual, the organizational and the societal. Sustainability at one level cannot be built by exploiting the integrity of the other components as these levels are intimately related to the organization's key stakeholders: personnel, customers, owners and the society. With these dynamics in mind, an RCE is the perfect means through which to gather individuals with the necessary thinking skills and provide them with immediate opportunities for putting the necessary plans into action.

A prerequisite for the sustainable development of human resources at the system level (individual, organizational or societal) is to achieve a simultaneous balance between the needs and goals of stakeholders at different levels. An exceedingly short-termed profit plan with strategies such as downsizing, outsourcing, or contingent work is undoubtedly incompatible with
long-term social and economic objectives. Conventional human resources development input will not be able to pursue these points because of the discontinuity in systemic perspectives particularly in the understanding of the value chain of particular products and/or services.

One of the most important components in the development of human resources is to provide the individual with as broad coverage on generic knowledge and skills as possible but at the same time to train the person in a particular specialization. In sustainability literacy, this is known as the development of systemic thinking ability. In order to master this ability, one has to be well versed in the language of each of the system’s component. This would inevitably require the interaction of the individuals in question with the various components involved. Consequently, this process is comparable to the education process of universities except for the change in focus and the emphasis placed upon the development of human resources. Traditional development of human resources is primarily concerned with individual performance and competitiveness; human resources development for sustainability practices however, require an alternate work ethic - one that is rooted in societal and mutually cooperative endeavors. Such constructive practices imply changes in the following approaches: a shift in focus from the conventional content-based outlook of human resources development to a “new” form of development that places an equal amount of emphasis on content, abilities and values; training by productive professionals that focus on developing citizen-professionals; the orientation of labor market needs that are centered on the needs of the society as a whole; and economic growth that caters to social wellbeing such as contributions to the collective good, society building and to human and social development (GUNI 2008).

Ideally, RCE’s structure will bring together actors from various levels of governance - from those that exist at the rudimentary level such as schools, museums and other everyday social institutions up to state and national development agencies, thus reflecting a diverse community consisting of various disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives. A platform that facilitates the interaction of varying ideas, standpoints and discourses about real social issues is undeniably an ideal manifestation of what constitutes a university - given that the diversity of its constituents reflect the varied demographics of society.

RCE’s transformational agenda is another clear example of its institutional strength. As a process, the development of human resources is in itself an act of transforming individuals to the desired competency level aspired by a particular organization. As mentioned earlier, the development of human resources for sustainable development purposes however, requires a different approach as opposed to what is conventionally practiced by other institutions; consequently, as an institution that reflects the qualities of an ideal university, it is only through RCE’s well-synerized and comprehensively-linked platform that the sustainability goals discussed can be achieved. The reason for this is clear, in that unlike conventional universities which develop their human resources in a manner detached from the rest of society, RCE’s human resources development takes into account the issues and challenges that are reflective of actual societal complexities thus requiring collective and systemic perspectives in search for solutions.

RCEs were established as non-formal/informal education platforms with the goal of creating a community both learned and practiced in the field of sustainable development in conjunction with the UN’s Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Given their functions as avenues for social learning, such platforms can also be utilized to function as non-formal developmental instruments for developing human resources via training and capacity building, given its multi-stakeholder and multilevel nature. In time, it is certain that this will eventually pave the way toward the creation of a “sustainable society.” This means that sustainability literacy permeate through every development program.

RCE’s ultimate aim is to empower communities and enable them to face the challenges of Education for Sustainable Development. In this role, the development of human resources empowers the individual to manage, lead and implement necessary changes that are suited to organizational needs. On the other hand, in its role as a university, RCE prepares students to manage and effectively solve the societal problems they encounter as they venture into society
upon completion of their tertiary education. In either case, empowerment of the individual is only possible when the individual has access to gain the necessary competencies.

RCE Penang@USM – An Inside-out and Society-based Approach on Human Resources Development for a Sustainable Society

RCE Penang@USM has been in existence for 5 years and is currently re-synergizing the different stakeholders involved in its network. It is led by Universiti Sains Malaysia which adopts an inside-out approach in the implementation of its ESD strategies. There are various leadership models pertaining to an RCE’s implementation strategies. While all models have their pros and cons, having a university as a leader provides the distinct advantage of direct access to the student body, future human resources, and various new ideas and innovations that will influence the form and contents of the development process of human resources.

RCE Penang@USM has at least twelve (12) formal stakeholders representing various interest groups on social, economic and environmental sustainability issues. Since its recognition in 2005, various programs have been conducted that have direct and indirect implications on the discourse of human resources development for sustainability.

As discussed in this paper, specific knowledge, skills and literacies are required in order to meet the increasingly pressing needs for sustainable development and the creation of a sustainable society. Some of these include systemic and critical thinking, futuristic thinking, intergenerational values, and concern for the environment to name a few. Given the dynamics and diversity of these various skills and competencies, it is natural that only certain society-based platforms are able to provide such a comprehensive learning experience.

In line with this need, RCE Penang@USM has developed several programs that address different levels of society in order ensure the continuity of the sustainability cause. These comprehensive programs start from the kindergarten level, to primary and secondary schools, to university students and even faculty members and NGO leaders. Before the training on sustainability is conducted, a group of facilitators from among the university students and faculty members are trained on how to conduct these programs. This then, is what was meant by the earlier-mentioned inside-out approach whereby the individuals who have been equipped with sustainability knowledge go on to share this knowledge and the skills acquired to the various circles they are involved with.

A program that RCE Penang@USM was recently involved in was the Sustainable Penang Initiative II. The program had 60 participants from at least 20 stakeholder groups that consisted of NGO decision makers, NGO leaders, youths and academicians. The outcome of the project was to produce strategic recommendations toward making Penang a Sustainable City specifically in regards to human resources development needs in order to establish Penang as both a Knowledge and Transaction Hub. In addition to this, there are a number of ongoing programs which serve the platform of lifelong human resource development both as a training ground and in the actual implementation of ideas toward developing a sustainable society. Instances of these programs are capacity building efforts for the integration of ESD in the curricula of secondary school teachers, student leaders’ sustainability leadership courses and environmental awareness programs for children.

As far as the personal development process of students and faculty members are concerned, engagements with multi-stakeholder and multilevel RCE programs provide these participants with authentic, real-time experiences in comparison to university-bound programs that place an emphasis solely on the preparation of individuals for future participatory roles in society. It must be stressed here that the transition to actual sustainable development goals require nothing less than a society-based platform. The capacity building process needs to be profoundly altered - with the old paradigm of a detached society-organization development program deconstructed and replaced with new partnerships for human development.

These programs were made possible as a result of consultation processes followed by the strategic engagement and subsequent empowerment of RCE Penang@USM’s stakeholders.
which was carried out in the early years of its establishment (RCE Penang@USM, 2005-2009 Interim Report). The internal strengths of USM, as a result of the university’s inside-out approach are fundamentally critical to the success and effectiveness of the RCE platform as an avenue for the development of human resources. This can be ascribed to the fact that most RCEs in existence (and societies in general), are still at the transitional stage of their development in regards to greater sustainability awareness and the implementation of sustainable practices. As of such, transitional skills require continuous training and development processes to ensure that these activities do not exclude the realities and complexities of society, thus illustrating the advantages that RCEs have in comparison to organizational or university-based human resources development programs.

Conclusion

Many conventional education systems are currently facing strong criticisms due to the pressures of reorienting the manner in which they address urgent issues of the 21st century. Because the ultimate goal of human development encompasses training endeavors and all the other components of human resource development, there is an obvious need for the existence of a similar paradigm in the content and approaches utilized by both institutions. To further add to this point, skills that are critical in nature yet still sufficiently generic such as systems thinking and future thinking must be further emphasized. Societal needs therefore should be the ultimate reference point in this situation, not the needs of the organization; that being said, it is the creation of an appropriate and enabling environment that is the most challenging goal to achieve. By nature, the sustainable development agenda is a continuously evolving phenomenon requiring quick response from dynamic human resources in order to respond to the latest changes, trends and issues in society. Consequently, what is needed is an environment that meets sustainability challenges i.e. a ‘university’ that accurately represents the various sectors and echelons of society. Thus, given the mission and structure of RCEs, it is quite clear to see that as an institution, it is a highly conducive platform to facilitate the continuous development of human resources.

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