

Improving economic and social well-being through university initiatives

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FIGURES released by the Department of Statistics last year showed that the male population in the country stood at 16.7 million while the female population was at 15.7 million.

Yet the same set of statistics found that the labour force participation rate of men is higher at 83.1 per cent compared to women at 54.7 per cent.

The European Union and United Nations Women in a joint statement at the launch of the We Empower Asia programme last year said: "Women who are economically empowered have greater access to income and economic assets, better control over their own economic gains and more equitable decision-making power to translate these gains into social, economic, and health benefits for themselves, their families and their societies."

Hence, it is important to empower women with various skills and knowledge-bases that will not only improve economic and social well-being but also potentially, their families and the community. Universities in Malaysia are increasingly cognisant of this fact.

Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, through the Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA) and the Tun Fatimah Hashim Women Leadership Centre (TFHWLC) respectively, are at the forefront of women empowerment initiatives at universities.

KANITA director Professor Dr Noraida Endut said the centre "engenders knowledge" by bringing gender perspectives to the forefront of academic thinking.

Academics and researchers at KANITA represent converging efforts of various disciplines (law, anthropology, communication, sociology, political science, health sciences etc.) towards championing gender equality, equity and justice in the society, both theoretically and in practice.

TFHWLC director Professor Dotir Dr Nonzan Abdul Razak said the centre's vision is to empower women towards eminence in leadership, organisation, community and family and promote women as the catalyst for national development.

"Our mission is to empower women through leadership, education, training, research and policy formulation input by fulfilling the demands and challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution," she said.

ONLINE LEARNING

KANITA recently completed a pilot Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) project aimed at empowering single mothers.

"Studies have confirmed that investing in lifelong learning will benefit both individuals and nations in terms of income, employment, productivity and health. It is also argued that providing opportunities to learn throughout life seems to be critical in the struggle to eradicate poverty and to educate for sustainable development.



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NORAIDA ENDUT
KANITA director



Norizan Abdul Razak

"While MOOCs in the nation have so far targeted students at institutions of higher learning, their potential in offering lifelong learning to different groups in society cannot be underestimated," said Noraida.

With this purpose in mind, USM and international partners have embarked on developing MOOCs that target marginalised groups in Asia and have chosen the case of the single mothers/parents for Malaysia.

The project, Noraida said, forms part of the larger project titled "Capacity to organise massive public educational opportunities in universities of Southeast Asia" or CompetenSEA, for short, funded by the ERASMUS+CBHE grant for the EU.

Partners are Open Universiteit Nederland, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Universitat des Saarlandes, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, University of the Philippines and Ateneo de Manila University.

Many of the single mothers that KANITA has interacted with, reported lack of skills to earn a livelihood due to having to fulfil full-time domestic role while they were married. They also have some issues in relation to knowledge and skills about general well-being such as health, self-confidence and communication.

"Online learning will provide a more flexible and accessible avenue for the single mothers to learn and acquire new knowledge and skills that can empower them towards independent living and livelihood," she said.

USM collaborated with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak to design and develop the MOOC — called *Jom Duit!* — to reflect the desired economic outcome, which not only focused on economic skills but also include interventions that can help improve single mothers' social well-being.

The MOOC has three components. Part A contains introductory remarks and explanations about the MOOC and general instructions for students; B has courses like Basic Skills in Business and Entrepreneurship, ICT Skills for Social Media Promotions, and Law, Health and Family. Let's Be Active, Proactive and Legal Literate.

In Part C, students learn via the MOOC and translated the lessons into physical activities subjects like Baking Cakes and Cupcakes, Composting (at Home), Stingless Bee Honey Production (Madu Kelulut), and Weaving (Sarawak Art).

The pilot for the MOOC was conducted starting June and ended on Aug 9 to test its utility, suitability and sustainability for the target group. Eight women out of the original 20 managed to complete the course and received certificates.

The pilot has really given the researchers great insight into the challenges faced by single mothers in accessing, committing to and completing a process of lifelong learning. These challenges are closely related to their access to resources and their sociocultural contexts. The pilot also informs us on how to improve the con-



tent of the courses, either from the point of view of the substance or the process in the courses," she said.

After the pilot, Noraida said researchers from KANITA will be conducting what they call a "real phase" implementation of the project. "In the real phase, we will incorporate improvements based on feedback in the pilot and target a bigger and more diverse cohort of subscribers to the course."

POSITIVE RESPONSE

One of the first things the participants were able to sell during the MOOC pilot was compost and the second, cupcakes.

"There is ready market for compost and the single mothers were able to get free food scraps from markets and neighbours that they now have consistent supplies to make compost. Composting is easy, low capital and there is a market. But we need to teach them about packaging now. The honey is a bit costly to start because the hive is specially made," said Noraida.

Rosnani Hamid, 51, a food entrepreneur who lives on the upper storey of a shophouse, said she had learnt through YouTube before and it was her first time getting acquainted with MOOC.

"I could understand what the instructors taught but was not familiar with the workings of the MOOC. I had to reach out to Farah, Professor Noraida's research assistant, numerous times via WhatsApp and on the

phone to ask her what to do next. She said: "Tekan je, Makak!" [just press the keys] when I got scared. That was her tagline for us 'students'. Just press on the keys," she said.

She found the fundamental courses and baking classes useful for her purpose which is to expand her business and would certainly recommend learning via MOOC.

Zakiah Mohamad, a public sector retiree in her 60s, had forgotten many of her office skills since leaving her job. But with the MOOC, she was able to learn new tech skills.

"I tried to do all the assignments but there were some technical glitches that made it difficult for me to submit my work. Otherwise, I'm happy with the course and will try to follow as best I can. I am happy about the composting course and will possibly embark on a small business selling compost," she said.

Che Zan Md Ariff, 62, another retiree, enjoyed her first time doing full online learning via MOOC. Regarded as the class monitor, Che Zan had accessed videos on the Net previously to learn new things.

"I had problems learning through the phone due to small screen and interface issues. Perhaps USM can help single mothers get access to



Rosnani Hamid



Che Zan Md Ariff