

TOWARD BECHMARKING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WITH ADULTS IN THE MALAYSIAN YOUTH SERVICE THROUGH CROSS-NATIONAL RESERACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a current cross-national research initiative to study the effectiveness and impact of youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) on developmental youth outcomes in four countries: the United States, Canada, Portugal and Malaysia. In Western contexts, Y-APs have been conceptualized as youth and adults working collaboratively for program or community action and are characterized by mutuality in teaching and learning as well as in program and organizational decision-making. Y-APs have been utilized as an effective tool for youth leadership development by engaging young people and adults in meaningful participation and working together for the sake of their organizations and communities. As Malaysia continues to move forwards toward its national goal of development and high-income status, there is a need to empower its youth by helping them acquire the needed skills and competences to fulfill their role as partners in national development. This paper puts forward the idea that Y-APs are a promising approach to further this aim, especially among Malaysian youth in the 18-to-25 year-old age group.

Keywords: Youth-Adult Partnership, Youth Development, Youth Outcomes, Youth Engagement, Malaysian Youth Sector

ABSTRAK

Kertas kerja ini menerangkan inisiatif penyelidikan semasa merentas negara bagi memahami keberkesanan serta impak perkongsian belia-dewasa (Y-APs) dalam pembangunan belia di empat negara: Amerika Syarikat, Kanada, Portugal dan Malaysia. Dalam konteks Barat, konsep Y-APs dijelaskan sebagai belia dan dewasa bekerjasama dalam program atau komuniti dan bercirikan persamaan dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran baik dalam program mahupun pembuatan keputusan dalam organisasi. Y-APs telah digunakan sebagai alat yang berkesan dalam melahirkan kepimpinan belia melalui penglibatan golongan muda dan dewasa dalam penyertaan yang penuh bermakna dan bekerjasama semata-mata untuk organisasi dan komuniti mereka. Memandangkan Malaysia melangkah ke hadapan ke arah mencapai matlamat pembangunan nasional dan status berpendapatan tinggi, terdapat keperluan untuk memberi ruang kepada golongan belia dengan membantu mereka memperoleh kemahiran dan kecekapan yang diperlukan supaya mereka berperanan sebagai rakan dalam pembangunan negara. Kertas kerja ini

mencadangkan bahawa Y-APs merupakan pendekatan yang berkesan bagi mencapai hasrat ini, khususnya dalam kalangan belia Malaysia kategori umur 18-25 tahun.

Kata Kunci: *Perkongsian Dewasa Belia, Pembangunan Belia, Hasil Belia, Penglibatan Belia, Sektor Belia Malaysia*

BACKGROUND

The paper begins by providing a background of the Malaysian youth sector, its current structure, and how it is evolving from a pure service-provision sector to a facilitator of youth engagement and empowerment. Youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) are then introduced as a viable strategy for youth development that coincides with the three highest rungs on Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), where young people are engaged with adults as partners in community and organization-based projects and initiatives, rather than being mere tokens or recipients of services. The potential and implications of Y-APs in the context of the Malaysian youth sector are then considered. The paper concludes by discussing a cross-national study currently underway involving youth research teams from four countries: the U.S., Portugal, Canada and Malaysia, and its goal of providing a better understanding of where Malaysia stands in its current practice of Y-AP, and its prospects as a strategy to enhance youth engagement within the overall Malaysian youth service.

Background of the Malaysian Youth Sector

The Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (2007) define youth as those between the ages of 15 to 40 years (Act 668, Section 2). This age range is bigger than most other countries and international bodies, such as the United Nations, who define the youth as between 14 to 24 years and the Commonwealth Youth Program, which uses 16 to 24 years as its official youth age range (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1998). The Malaysian youth community is multicultural and reflects the larger population, comprised of about 57% Malay, 25% Chinese, 7% Indian, and 10.1% non-citizen and indigenous population (Imam et al., 2009). The National Youth Societies and Youth Development Act 2007 define youth as those between the ages of 15 to 40 years (Act 668, Section 2). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), this group comprises more than 41 % of the total population of Malaysia.

The first nine 5-year national development plans prioritized the nation's youth as an important target population. This resulted in steady growth in funding and youth development programming. Programs were developed within three learning contexts: formal learning, informal learning, and non-formal learning. Formal learning is conducted through the formal school system comprising primary and secondary schools, tertiary institutions, vocational institutions, and by professional bodies where students acquires accredited professional qualifications in knowledge, competency and skills training (Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson, 2005; Merriam, Cafarella, and Baumgartner, 2007). Informal learning is carried

out through activities that are unscheduled and unstructured in their approach (Cross, 2007), and is delivered through the Malaysian government's flagship and other leisure-based programs, including the Rakan Muda (Young Friends) program, as well as those by various voluntary organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in fields such as youth, sports, recreation, volunteerism, welfare and social development. Likewise, non-formal learning, which is delivered outside of the formal education system but retains a fixed structure, is also delivered by governmental, private sector organizations and NGOs, but in the form of short courses and seminars that are extension-based in nature.

Youth Development in Malaysia

In the context of youth development programming, the Malaysian youth age range of 15 to 40 years is divided into two segments: 15 to 25 years for fundamental youth development such as character building and values development, professional and vocational skills and competencies; and the second segment of 26 to 40 years, which is mainly targeted for leadership development initiatives and experiences. The first segment comprises about 18.8 per cent of the youth population, while the latter group representing approximately 22.2 per cent (Kwan Meng, 2012; Hamzah, 2005; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006; United Nations, 2007).

The Malaysian government's recognition of the importance of youth to the country was initially expressed as their role as future leaders. Only within the past decade has this begun to shift, where there is a quiet but growing acceptance that young people are important players in the well-being of the country in their current capacity, not only in their future adult roles. This was captured by the National Youth Development Action Plan that was launched in 2004 and outlined 11 core youth development areas of focus: economic development and entrepreneurship, social development, Rakan Muda program, human resource development, delivery system, role of media and communication, role of youth organizations, development of youth without organizations, leadership development, research and development, political awareness and national integration (Malaysian Institute for Youth Development Research, 2007). This Plan formed the basis of consideration for the 9th Malaysia Plan on empowering youth for the future (Kwan Meng, 2012; Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2006).

Structure and Mandate of the Malaysian Youth Sector

While several government agencies have developed programs for youth where their respective portfolios overlap with youth needs (e.g., youth health programs sponsored by the Ministry of Health), the main agency responsible for youth development funding and policy leadership is the Ministry of Youth and Sports. In addition, there is the principal non-governmental youth body - the Malaysian Youth Council (MYC), and other non-governmental organizations that fall under MYC's purview.

In the Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, the divisions overseeing youth affairs are the Youth Division, which oversees the youth movement and their organizations, the Rakan Muda Development Division to oversee leisure-based youth development programs in the age group of 14 to 25 years, and the Sports Division, which provides sports-for-all or mass sports, outdoor recreation, fitness and active living. As the government agency in charge of youth matters, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is also the main youth policymaking body. However, they also work in partnership and consultation with the various youth organizations in formulating youth policies. Under the purview of the Ministry of Youth and Sports is also the Registrar of Youth that regulates and facilitates the governance of youth organizations in accordance with the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (Kwan Meng, 2012). The national flagship programs for youth development include the three-month National Youth Service (PLKN) program administered by the Ministry of Defense that aims to develop young people's skills and patriotic spirit, the health-based Prostar program administered by the Ministry of Health to address HIV/AIDS issues, and the positive youth development program the Anugerah Remaja Perdana Rakan Muda (ARPRM, known as the Youth Award Program after the Duke of Edinburgh International Youth Award program), administered by the Ministry of Youth and Sports (Kwan Meng, 2012).

Besides the three governmental agencies mentioned above, the Malaysian Youth Council (MYC) as the umbrella body of youth non-governmental organizations (NGOs) coordinates activities of the various youth organizations including with regional and international youth NGOs. Some private organizations also run youth programs for the purpose of carrying out corporate social responsibility and professional development. Most of these agencies and organizations are mainly concerned with generating programs, activities, and events to address youth issues and enable youth participation and activity. But specific initiatives such as Rakan Muda and the ARPRM program, in particular, are the two major initiatives where positive youth development is explicit in its objectives (The International Secretariat, 2004; Holt, 2008).

While the Rakan Muda program is the principal program of the Ministry of Youth and Sports' Rakan Muda Development Division to implement leisure-based activities for all young people in the 15 to 25 age group, the ARPRM program goes further (The International Secretariat, 2004). In ARPRM, young participants are individually partnered with adult leaders and mentors for guidance and coaching over an extended time period. The Award program facilitates positive youth development through an array of challenging community-based activities that the young participants choose – with the help of their mentors – toward developing their values, life skills, competencies, and physical health. It was founded in 1956 by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh together with Dr. Kurt Hahn who also founded the Outward Bound schools (The International Secretariat, 2004; Kwan Meng, 2012).

Youth development in Malaysia is managed primarily by three major organizations: the National Youth Consultative Council; the Ministry of Youth and Sports; and the Malaysian Youth Council. This section outlines the general organizational structure of each of the three bodies.

(a) *National Youth Consultative Council (NYCC)*

The National Youth Consultative Council, formed in 1972, is the principal body responsible for youth policy formulation in Malaysia. Chaired by the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS), the NYCC's membership consists of the following:

- Members of the Supreme Council of the Malaysian Youth Council (MYC);
- Members of the MYC's Executive Committee;
- Chairpersons of State Youth Consultative Councils;
- 10 representatives from other federal government agencies including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Human Resources, the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, and the Department of Islamic Development;
- 10 experts appointed by the MOYS;
- 3 resource persons on specific issues;
- Senior officers of the MOYS and Directors of State Youth and Sport Departments; and
- Joint Secretary and Director General of MOYS and Secretary General of the MYC.

The objectives of the NYCC are to monitor the implementation of the National Youth Policy; to advise the Minister of Youth and Sports in formulating policies on issues related to youth development; to act as a consultative and advisory body for youth organizations and the State Youth Consultative Councils; and to coordinate the planning and activities of all youth organizations and the State Youth Consultative Councils. The NYCC convenes twice a year to discuss reports submitted from the participating members as well as other topics of interest.

(b) *Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS)*

The Ministry of Youth and Sports, formerly the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, was established in 1964. The Ministry's main function is to contribute to the development of youth policy through its position as chair of the NYCC, and to serve as the policy's key implementation body.

Three members of Parliament direct the MOYS: a Minister, a Deputy Minister, and a Parliamentary Secretary. The Ministry has a Secretary General, a Deputy Secretary General, and Officers from the administrative and the diplomatic corps. The two divisions of the Ministry include the Youth Division and the Sports Division, each headed by a Director General.

The Youth Division consists of the following departments:

- Skill Training Institutes, of which there are seven throughout the country;
- Youth Economic Development Department;
- Youth NGO Development Department; and
- Rakan Muda (Young Friends) Program.

At the state level, the MOYS is represented by the Director of the State Youth and Sports Department. District Youth and Sports Officers are also present at the local level.

(c) *Malaysian Youth Council*

The Malaysian Youth Council (MYC) is a non-governmental voluntary organization, which was formed in 1948. It plays an active role in monitoring the implementation of the National Youth Policy as well as in the policy formulation process through the NYCC. The MYC is also the sole coordinating body for youth and student organizations in Malaysia. MYC membership is open to national youth organizations and state youth councils, which operate in at least 7 out of the 14 states in the country with a membership of at least 2,000 youth. Participating organizations must be voluntary and self-governing and support democratic principles.

The MYC currently has 35 national and state youth-affiliated organizations including student organizations, socio-economic organizations, religious organizations, uniformed organizations and state youth councils. The student organizations comprise the Federation of Malay Students Unions and the National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students. The seven socio-economic organizations include the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) Youth Council involving youth living on plantations; the 4B Youth Movement; the Tamil Bell Youth Club; the Young Malaysians Movement including a mix of ethnicities; the United Youth Movement of Malaysia, the Malaysian Youth Hostel Association and the Sabah National Youth Organization. The religious organizations that form part of the MYC are the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, the Malaysian Hindu Youth Organization, the Young Buddhist Associations of Malaysia, the Young Christian Workers, the Young Men's Christian Association, the Young Methodists Fellowship of Malaysia and Puteri Islam. Uniformed organizations include the Boys Brigade, the Girls Brigade, the Girl Guides Association, St. John Ambulance and the Scouts Federation of Malaysia.

Finally, all of the states in Malaysia have a State Youth Council, with the exception of Sarawak in which SABERKAS takes the place of a state youth council. The objectives of the MYC are: to uphold and strengthen the voluntary and democratic principles of the youth movement; to make recommendations to the government, statutory bodies and other appropriate bodies on matters affecting youth; to establish and maintain relations with other national and international youth councils and organizations; to promote international respect, inter-communal

understanding, cooperation and harmony through youth work; and to promote and encourage interest in the moral, intellectual and physical development of youth in the country among interested groups. The MYC is affiliated with the World Assembly of Youth (WAY) and its representatives serve as the President of the Asian Youth Council (AYC) and the Chairperson of the Committee for ASEAN Youth Co-operation (CAYC).

As a small country of 28 million, most youth-related programming and policy is driven at the federal level, which is then translated into policy at the state and district levels. However, most decision-making is made at the top. This is in-line with the country's federation structure, which relies on the federal government to guide policy decisions. At the community level, most of the traditional youth development programming is carried out by local or international NGOs (e.g., Girl Guides, Red Crescent Society, Scouts, etc.), which are embedded both within schools and outside. Youth organizations are seen as one of the main 'enablers' of youth development in the country. However, while the country boasts over 8,000 registered youth organizations, less than 20% are active (Hamzah et al., 2011).

ENHANCING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT TO ADDRESS CONTEMPORARY ISSUES: RECENT TRENDS IN THE MALAYSIAN YOUTH SECTOR

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, rates of drug use, sexual promiscuity, HIV/AIDS, crime, divorce, children born out of wedlock, child abuse and other negative social trends involving young people have been reported in Malaysia (Idris et al., 2008; Low, 2009; Jalal and Sumari, 2008; EASCAP, 2002). Social ills among youth are now of primary concern to the Malaysian public and are even the focal point of apocalyptic discourses on the general demise of the family and other major social systems (Stivens, 2006; Krauss, 2008). These trends have caused the Ministry of Youth and Sports to increase its emphasis and funding of youth programming to address these perceived negative social trends (Krauss et al., 2012).

Despite a somewhat reactionary emphasis on the need for more youth programs to address problematic behaviors and the increased funding that has accompanied it, there have been few formal efforts to assess youth development practice and how it impacts on program effectiveness. This includes those charged with delivering services to young people in out-of-school programmatic settings, i.e. direct-service youth workers and youth officers, to which little attention has been paid in attempting to make sense of what is happening 'on the ground'. Furthermore, due to the poor image of youth work as an occupation in Malaysia, there are concerns that youth workers are under-qualified and lack the professional practice and dedication that is normally required of human service professionals in developed nations. As such, the professionalism of those working with young people in Malaysia has come into question (Bandar Abdullah, 2009).

In an attempt to address this gap, a study by Bandar Abdullah (2009) reported that only 10% of youth workers in Malaysia had any formal certification in youth work at the time of her study. Krauss et al. (2012) further reported that among a sample of nearly 900 youth work practitioners, those who had exceeded SPM level (i.e. high school) education, particularly those with bachelor's degrees or higher and who had worked six years or more in the field indicated significantly higher levels of professionalism. These findings resonate with the current push for continuing education and higher salaries of youth work practitioners in other countries and support the need for youth work practitioners to increase their education, both formally and non-formally (Astroth, Garza and Taylor, 2004).

As a field of practice, youth work is not new to Malaysia. Increases in the national development allocation for youth work and related programs testify to national concerns and commitment to the nation's youth development agenda. According to the 9th Malaysia Plan, the total development expenditure and allocation for youth development programs by the federal government for years 2006-2010 was 5.46 billion Ringgit (approximately 2 billion USD), an increase of 10.3 percent as compared to the 8th Malaysia Plan where it stood at 4.95 billion Ringgit (Ninth Malaysian Plan, 2006).

According to the Ministry of Youth and Sports, there are nearly 1,000 government-based direct service youth practitioners in Malaysia, coupled with approximately 1,000 more working in NGOs (Bandar Abdullah, 2009). Youth work in Malaysia is not yet a recognized profession and most youth workers and youth officers tend to be undervalued by the larger society for the work they do with youth (Hamzah, 2005). However, substantial efforts have been made over the past twenty years in formalizing youth work toward higher levels of professional practice and recognition. Beginning as far back as the 1970s, youth work has moved towards professionalization through in-service courses (Hamzah, 1987). In the mid-1990s, in-service training evolved culminating in the creation of the Diploma in Youth in Development Work through an innovative partnership involving the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia (KBS), and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997). The concerted role played by the three partners was unprecedented not only for Malaysia but for the Southeast Asian region. The Diploma program still stands today as the flagship for youth work practitioner professional development in Malaysia and the region (Krauss et al., 2012).

Since the development of the Diploma in Youth Work program, however, there have been few formal efforts to enhance professional practice in youth work in Malaysia. Since 2005, local scholars and advocates such as (Azimi) Hamzah and others have called for the creation of a code of ethics for youth workers and sets of practice standards as integral steps toward raising the level and quality of youth work in the country. Although the initiative has received widespread support, it has yet to be embraced by national-level policy makers.

FROM SERVICE PROVISION TO EMPOWERMENT: MAKING MALAYSIAN YOUTH GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE THROUGH YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Young people's engagement and empowerment in the context of community-based youth development is currently of great interest to the global youth sector. Though more countries continue to embrace youth development as an approach to working with young people, we still know little about the extent of young people's engagement and empowerment in such efforts, particularly in the context of youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) within programs and organizations. Even greater gaps exist when we begin to explore these issues across different national and cultural landscapes.

In the context of Malaysia, the most recent Malaysian Youth Index 2010 showed that young peoples' sense of empowerment score was only 55.8 (out of 100 index score), indicating that Malaysian youth lack a strong sense of empowerment in their organizations, communities and everyday lives. Furthermore, in another recent study evaluating the effectiveness of the Malaysian National Youth Development Policy (Hamzah et al., 2011), only 7% of the 1,748 young people sampled strongly agreed with the statement that youth involvement in programs/activities has improved over the past five years; only 9% strongly agreed that they felt involved in the design/planning/program development activities of their respective youth programs; only 10% felt strongly that youth are seen as recipients rather than as partners in development; and only 15% felt strongly that youth are actively involved in finding solutions to issues relating to them.

In a recent study on the APRPM Rakan Muda program, Kwan Meng (2012) examined the influence of adult mentoring practice on (youth) mentee learning outcomes. He found that of the six mentoring functions examined, only facilitation and coaching significantly predicted mentee learning, while bonding, relationship quality, reflection and guiding did not. The findings indicate that in the context of Gold award winners (the highest level of achievement within the program), there are important elements within the mentoring process that are not significantly contributing to youth learning outcomes. From these and other research-based indicators, there is evidence that research is needed to understand youth-adult engagement and its impact on youth outcomes more directly.

Youth-Adult Partnerships as Strategy for Youth Engagement and Empowerment

In other parts of the world, youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) are becoming an important strategy for promoting youth development and building stronger youth programs and healthy communities. Y-APs have been conceptualized as a way that youth and adults can work collaboratively for program or community action and are characterized by mutuality in teaching and learning as well as in decision-making (Camino, 2000). In some youth program settings, youth practitioners have added youth as partners to reflect the principle that young people should have legitimate

opportunities to develop and exercise decision-making power in program activities and community initiatives (Camino, 2000).

Youth and adults working in partnership can empower young people in numerous ways, often called by a variety of names including youth participation, active citizenship, youth leadership, youth empowerment and youth voice. Youth voice as a product of Y-APs describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share in the decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Mitra, 2008). Youth voice is a product of adults working with youth, where the two engage one another, and adults give youth a platform to develop key competencies needed for their healthy development.

In relation to Malaysia's nation building goals and its expressed desire to make youth partners in the development process, the literature on Y-APs points to several outcomes that are highly relevant to what Malaysia is trying to achieve with its youth development efforts in relation to nation building. Although to date there is little research on the factors that promote sustained engagement in youth organizations, insight has been gained from studies of participation in education, extracurricular activities, and youth service activities (Zeldin, 2004). In the few studies that have been conducted on youth engagement with adults in the context of organizational and program governance, the findings on youth development outcomes have been quite profound. Such studies from the U.S. have shown youth engagement to be closely associated with an enhanced sense of safety, self-confidence, efficacy and empowerment, intensive identity exploration, acquisition of skills and competencies related to the procedural aspects of governance, sociopolitical awareness and civic competence and community connections translating into enhanced social capital (Zeldin and Petrokubi, 2008; Zeldin, Petrokubi and Camino, 2008; Zeldin, 2004).

Although the literature on outcomes of Y-APs remains limited primarily to the U.S., the findings as reported above indicate that there is much promise for Y-APs in the Malaysian context. Y-APs can provide Malaysian youth with important learning experiences resulting from real-world experiences and service working alongside adults. In turn, adults would also benefit from working with young people to better understand contemporary Malaysian youth culture. This is important in a society that is experiencing what many believe to be a 'generation gap' due to the rapid pace of development, technological advancement and globalization, which are often perceived as a threat to traditional values and cultural norms (Abd Manaf, 2009). Y-APs and real engagement in community and organizational settings can also help Malaysian youth - who are generally considered to lack the self-confidence, technical skills and general efficacy required to succeed in an increasingly competitive global labor market (Singh and Singh, 2008) - acquire needed personal competences and marketable skills. Lastly, being directly involved in community and organizational governance alongside adults can provide Malaysian youth with a sense of real sociopolitical empowerment where they feel involved in the process of change. The latter is of particular importance in relation to considerable evidence

of perceived political disenfranchisement among Malaysian youth, as supported by among others, low Malaysian Youth Index scores on perceived political participation (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2012).

Youth-Adult Partnerships in the Malaysian Youth Sector

In Malaysia, national youth development programs such as Rakan Muda have the goal of “moulding today’s youth to achieve excellence in order to support and contribute to the community and the country” (Ministry of Youth and Sports Malaysia, 2011). Within such programs, however, there is little understanding as to how young participants engage with adults, and the extent to which youth feel empowered and entrusted with decision-making and other leadership roles. The level of ‘youth voice’ in the planning and direction of programs and organizations is relatively unknown. Put simply, there is little empirical or descriptive data within the Malaysian youth sector explaining how youth and adults engage one another, and the extent to which such partnership results in positive outcomes for youth and organizations.

According to Hamzah et al. (2011), youth development programs in Malaysia remain highly top-down, with governance primarily concentrated among either adults or older youth above the age of 30. The lack of genuine opportunities for youth under age 30 to be fully engaged in youth development programs has been cited as a possible cause of the non-performance of hundreds of youth organizations in the country. Despite this possibility, Malaysian youth researchers have yet to explore the impact of all forms of Y-APs within functioning organizations toward empowering young people (particularly those between 15 and 30) and enhancing youth outcomes, both short-term and long-term.

Although the recent general discourse among policy makers has focused more on the importance of empowering young people, there has been little explicit attention paid to the role of youth-adult partnerships in doing so. Much of the attention paid to youth empowerment has been in the form of a general call for creating new opportunities for involvement in decision-making at both local and international youth settings, in the hope of providing young people a greater sense of ‘world-readiness’ and developing the competencies needed to compete on the global stage (Hamzah et al., 2011). Although there has been little mention of Y-APs as a strategy for youth empowerment, this does not mean that they do not exist within the Malaysian youth service, however. Among the vast number of youth programs, organizations, school-based and community initiatives, as well as the more informal settings where young people and adults interact (i.e. religious places of worship, villages, traditional/informal organizations, etc.), there are multiple settings where young people and adults ‘partner’ in a number of formal and informal ways. From the perspective of formal research, however, there have been few formal efforts to track, identify or understand them.

There are a few possible reasons for the lack of emphasis and attention on youth-adult partnerships in the Malaysian youth sector. One possible reason could be due to a general lack of understanding and appreciation for the importance and effectiveness of such strategies. Another could be due to cultural barriers, as Malaysia is a more traditional society than most Western countries in terms of the roles of parents, teachers and other adult vis-à-vis young people (Abd Jalal and Sumari, 2008). Such cultural norms that reinforce adults as leaders and youth as followers would make youth-adult partnerships difficult to embrace philosophically, let alone practically. A third possibility could simply be due to a lack of knowledge on how youth-adult partnerships can work and be leveraged as a vehicle for developing young people. Lastly, the structure of youth development programs in Malaysia may detract from the time and nurturance needed to build strong Y-APs. For example, in the West there are many community-based youth centers that are a fixed part of community life where the same adults and youth are able to interact consistently over long periods of time. In Malaysia, however, such centers are rare, and most of the youth development programs run for fixed periods. Thus, youth and adults in Malaysia might lack important frameworks and infrastructure for building strong relationships – a necessary foundation of successful Y-APs.

Moving Forward with Youth-Adult Partnerships in Malaysia: The Y-AP Cross-National Research Initiative

On an international level, there have been few known attempts to examine Y-APs in a cross-cultural or cross-national context. Given the multitude of cultural and normative considerations related to youth and adults working together in the context of programs and communities, there is much that can be learned between different cultures and countries. Youth development outcomes resulting from Y-APs have yet to be supported with empirical data in a significant way. Such a study would inevitably be the first of its kind in establishing such a database, with the added possibility of including additional countries/localities/cultural contexts in the future.

The cross-national study discussed in this paper is headed by the Rothermel Bascom Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (USA), Dr. Shepherd Zeldin, and is being conducted in partnership with the Institute for Applied Community Psychology, Lisbon, Portugal, and the Student's Commission/Center for Youth Engagement, Ontario, Canada. The Institute for Social Science Studies (IPSAS), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) was invited to participate based on their extensive involvement in youth development research in both Malaysia and the Southeast Asian region. Using a longitudinal study design, the first of its kind in Malaysian youth development research, the expected outcomes of the study are: 1) to set up an international database of the effectiveness of Y-AP's in the context of youth program outcomes; this will be expanded with subsequent, follow-up studies; 2) to elevate the visibility and perception of youth and their contributions to community, both locally and internationally; 3) to inform policy makers and youth-serving organizations on the importance of enhancing Y-AP's, and provide strategies for doing so; 4) to develop an internationally validated survey

instrument to measure youth-adult partnerships; and 5) to establish linkages with international institutions focusing on youth issues. At the time of the writing of this manuscript, the research teams were in the data collection phase of the study, and plan to report the outcomes of the study sometime in 2013/2014.

Although there are many youth organizations on record in Malaysia, evidence suggests that decision-making within and between the vast majorities of these organizations is left to the older members and there is little substantive participation by the youth (Hamzah et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is little indication that youth-adult partnership, as an intentional strategy for youth engagement, is taking place on a significant scale. There have been a handful of high-profile examples of youth-led initiatives, for example, the Lab Transformasi Belia (Youth Transformation Lab) initiative instituted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports where a group of elite youth leaders from around the country were convened to develop concrete, large-scale recommendations for the government on youth initiatives. However, these are special programs reserved for a small minority of leaders and do not represent a general practice within the field. Furthermore, even within these youth-led initiatives, the role of adults as partners in the process is not well understood or discussed. The same holds true for initiatives like the National Youth Consultative Council (NYCC), which involves youth in high-profile leadership roles but without any indication as to how it and others like it work with adult policy makers. These are areas where research can play an important role.

Scant research has been conducted on the national flagship youth initiatives, the PLKN (National Service) program and Rakan Muda (Young Friends) in regard to youth and adult engagement. As flagship programs that involve by far the greatest number of young people in them, a culture of youth-adult partnership would be ideal in these settings as they are both explicitly developmental in their goals and scope. To date, however, we know very little about the extent of youth and adult engagement within them. Research conducted by Hamzah et al. (2002) in the early years of Rakan Muda indicated that one of the weaknesses of that program at the time was the lack of youth-centeredness in the program design and implementation. Although it has been 10 years since the original evaluative study, there is still a lack of data as to whether improvements have been made to the program following the initial evaluation. The APPRM program is another example of youth and adults working together, however, this is mainly in the form of mentoring, although in the course of carrying out their activities the young awardees might also engage with non-mentor adults in different capacities.

This study will, therefore, provide an opportunity to survey the effectiveness of youth-adult partnerships within the context of youth programs and organizations in four different countries. In the case of Malaysia, the study will be helpful in formulating initial benchmarks for youth-adult interaction and partnership in the country's youth service sector. The cross-national comparative element will allow us to begin to look at how Malaysia stands in comparison to other countries, all of them

developed, along the lines of Y-APs. This will be useful for establishing international benchmarks and targets for the future, as well as provide a rich comparative lens into many different aspects of youth development from different cultural contexts. Finally, empirical findings coupled with qualitative data on the environment and culture of the organizations and countries studied will allow the research team to ascertain how different cultural norms might influence the effectiveness of Y-APs.

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