

ACTS

Agents of Change Towards Sustainability

*Journey of Making a Difference:
From Whole Person to
Whole Society Transformation*



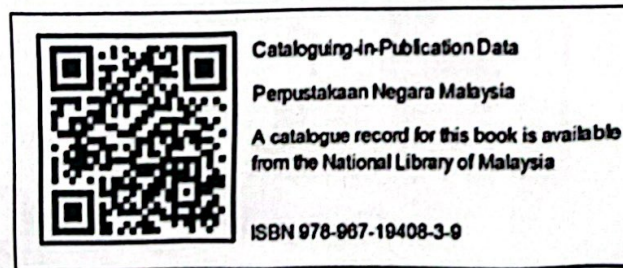
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AGENTS OF CHANGE TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY(ACTS)

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| PREFACE

The whole world now is focusing and relying on artificial intelligence, and specifically in education institutions; the use of ChatGPT and related apps have rapidly taken over many daily operations including teaching and learning, making the conventional method of assessment somehow irrelevant. A beautifully written answer script which used to take hours or days to be completed could now be produced in a few clicks of the applications. It is therefore more crucial than ever that we start to revisit our teaching and learning process. Humanising education is no longer an optional direction or ambition but an obligation and a must. In the race towards upgrading and advancing teaching and learning and research activities, the role of universities in community development was gradually forgotten. In the efforts of bringing back the role of university as the leveller of society, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is committed in mainstreaming this 'communiversity' concept and ensuring that the Whole - Institution Transformation that was happening inside the University spilled over to the surrounding communities leading towards Whole-Community Transformation.

'Communiversity' is a term beautifully crafted to depict the direction of the university now. It is a combination of community and university, highlighting the pressing need for both to be integrated, and universities are no longer an ivory tower but part and parcel of community development and transformation towards sustainable development.

In translating this agenda into a concrete action plan, IIUM has introduced new sustainable development courses, and embedded sustainable development in the existing courses as part of reorientation of curriculum towards Education for Sustainable Development. The process of curriculum reorientation is changing the narrative of community engagement as what used to be co-curricular activities, into the main curriculum of the university, truly translating the concept of 'communiversity' through formal education.

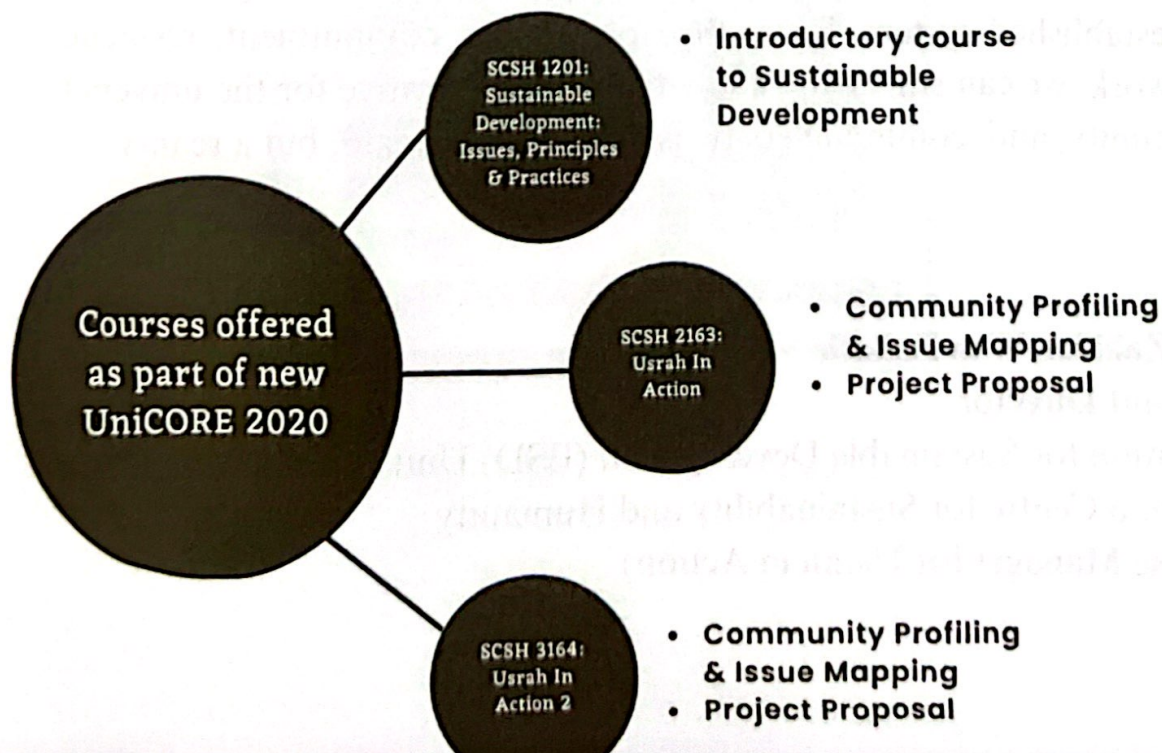
IIUM has introduced three new courses as part of university required courses which are:

- 1) SCSH 1201: Sustainable Development: Issues, Principles and Practices
- 2) SCSH 2163: Usrah in Action 1
- 3) SCSH 3164: Usrah in Action 2

The first course is an introductory level course to set a foundation for students to understand the concept and principles of sustainable development, while the two subsequent courses are designed to implement the concept and principles into actions on the ground. In Usrah in Action I, students are expected to do a community profiling and issue mapping of the community of choice. At the end of the Usrah in Action I, students will present their proposed solution project i.e. sustainable community development project to be carried out in Usrah in Action 2 based on the issues found during the profiling and issue mapping in a one-day symposium. Usrah in Action 2 focuses on project planning and implementation.

The whole curriculum reorientation is illustrated below:

IIUM EFFORTS IN THE REORIENTATION OF CURRICULUM TOWARDS ESD



The introduction of Usrah in Action courses in IIUM is definitely implemented without making a splash to the current ecosystem. The stir that it caused comes with both positive impact and a fair amount of challenge. While we are far from reaching the perfect, it is paramount to document the unique journey as we progress through. The successful implementation of Usrah in Action is made possible due to undying commitment and contribution from all stakeholders involved. This includes the course owners and management team, instructors, students, juries and committees involved in the University in Action Symposium, funders, university management, and definitely the community. Altogether, they are the Agents of Change Towards Sustainability or in short, ACTS.

This book is a compilation of stories, first-hand experiences of ACTS in action, in their remarkable journey of making Usrah in Action a reality. The chapters presented in this book are not just the ideals or a dream scenario, but a real documentation of sweat and tears in the transformation process. It is a testament to the unwavering commitment and resilience of ACTS in facing the challenges and trials to bring this 'communiversity' agenda into practice. While it is not always a bed of roses along the journey, each moment is pivotal in leading towards where we are today.

May each story shared in this compilation serve as an attestation that despite the heartbreak, challenges, resistance faced in implementing changes into a long-established system, but with perseverance, commitment, resilience and teamwork, we can still create and write a new narrative for the university and community, and 'communiversity' is no longer a dream, but a reality.

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CHAPTER 07

“PAYING IT FORWARD”: BUILDING A COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY FOR THE COMMUNITY

Author:
DR. RAFIDAH SAHAR



The idea of "paying it forward" came up frequently in my personal and professional lives as a practitioner. Rather than merely navigating through life, I strongly believe that we are here to impact the world positively. My decision to teach Usrah in Action courses is driven by a deep desire to learn more about how I could contribute to the society meaningfully and practically. I have witnessed the positive effects of tiny deeds of kindness on people, families and even communities. I have seen the power of group effort in bringing about positive change in my past work with the local communities in Johor. Wanting to contribute more, education is my most effective instrument for enabling my students to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Teaching the courses provides me the platform to assist my students in becoming active members of society and agents of change by equipping them with the information, abilities and opportunities they need.

Usrah in Action courses were developed as part of the International Islamic University Malaysia's curriculum transformation towards Education for Sustainable Development. The shift emphasises values-based education aiming to build well-rounded, balanced, harmonious individuals which we name as Insan Sejahtera with diverse skills to benefit society. In this light, students are not products but vital and active forces that support and nurture the ecosystem of 'communiversity'. The Usrah in Action course is designed to be more than just another class; it offers an immersive experience that encourages students and instructors to leave their comfort zones and engage with the targeted local community. The students also learn the values of empathy, compassion and social responsibility, so they may make wise decisions and take significant steps toward establishing a more fair and equitable society. While the courses included a good range of assessments, including community profiling, reflective journal, portfolio, presentation and evaluation by the community, I have to say that the real learning happens when students are out in the field, navigating trials, solving problems, making connections and initiating change in the community.

My experience teaching the course so far has shown profound learning curves and great rewards, all critical to my development as a practitioner. One of the first challenges I faced was changing the mindset of the students from being too focused on the assessment to impacting the community and their personal growth.

Students frequently brought course assessments to the centre of classroom discussion in the early weeks of the semester. When the course assessments become merely a checklist for students to get good grades, the core objective of community engagement typically suffers. The emphasis on earning high grades may unwittingly foster an attitude in which personal gain trumps the desire to make meaningful change. This attitude may jeopardize the intended benefits for the students and prevent them from having a truly transformative experience.

The university may need to find alternative ways to assess student progress and engagement in the community. By shifting the focus away from grades and towards personal growth and development, students can be encouraged to approach community engagement with a genuine desire to make a difference. As the course progressed, I noticed a transformation in my students. They became more confident, empathetic and driven to make a meaningful impact. It was about more than just fulfilling a course requirement. It was about making a change impacting someone's life. They began to see the value in their actions and how they could positively contribute to society. This newfound perspective ignited a passion within them, leading to a deeper understanding of community engagement's importance and power to create positive change.

My next challenge came during the proposal writing stage, whereby the students had to zero in on issues and find solutions. They often needed help to pinpoint the most pressing problems and devise effective strategies to address them. One of the strategies I carried out with the students was the Plan, Do, Check, Act strategy approach that encouraged the students to work together to recognise issues and work on viable solutions systematically. By implementing the strategy, the students could break down the issues into manageable steps. This strategy empowered them to take ownership of their projects and see the direct impact of their actions. Through collaboration with each other and learning from each other, the students gradually became more adept at identifying problems and implementing effective solutions, further enhancing their ability to create positive change in their communities. The students also developed stronger critical thinking and problem-solving skills as this systematic approach improved their project outcomes and equipped them with valuable skills for future challenges. Ultimately, I witnessed the students become confident change-makers capable of addressing complex issues and making decisions that produced success throughout their learning endeavours.

In addition to crafting the proposal and implementing the project, I found that the students were timid to take on a proactive role in the project. Many students initially showed reluctance and scepticism regarding their ability to contact the targeted community. It was easy to understand why they felt this way; the prospect of breaking out of their comfort zones as students and actively participating in the community's life was intimidating, to say the least. To help the students break their shells, initial meetings with the members of the targeted community during the community profiling activity urged students to reach out and socialise with the people who were a part of the community we were trying to reach. Because of this direct involvement, they could connect emotionally with the problems at hand, comprehend the critical nature of taking action and build confidence and trust with the community members. As they started spending more time with the community members, they began to have genuine conversations and shared experiences, which helped them understand the challenges and struggles faced by the community.

This firsthand knowledge allowed them to develop empathy and a deeper understanding of the issues, which fuelled their motivation to make a difference. These conversations and shared experiences also fostered a sense of unity and solidarity between the students and the community members, creating a strong foundation for collaborative efforts towards positive change. From this, the students found that they had much in common with the members of the community. This newfound understanding, friendship, trust and empathy fuelled the students to break free from their timid selves and became enthusiastic advocates for positive change within the community.

Another hurdle I encountered in my experience was securing the necessary budget to cover the expenses related to the project. When addressing the lack of financial assistance issue, the students learnt the impact of financial constraints on enacting positive change. They realised the importance of resourcefulness and creativity in finding alternative solutions to these financial challenges. This experience taught them valuable lessons about real-world limitations and the need for strategic planning and networking in order to make a lasting impact on their community. These experiences allowed them to understand the significance of financial planning and management while developing a profound appreciation for the constraints faced in the field. They also learnt the value of collaboration and networking and the power of adaptability and flexibility, as they had to constantly adjust their strategies in response to unforeseen obstacles and changing circumstances.

At the end of each semester, a University in Action symposium to showcase students' works becomes a day to celebrate my students' milestones as novice community advocates. We celebrated our achievements together, knowing this newfound knowledge and mindset would empower us to make a positive difference in our communities and beyond.

In retrospect, my experience has been, without a doubt, a deeply fulfilling one. It was a journey of transformation, learning, and the realisation that we could create a ripple effect of positive change in our communities through our actions. My students became my inspiration as they, in their unique ways, paid forward the knowledge and experiences they had gained, thus perpetuating the cycle of giving back to the community. The courses are about education, instilling values and nurturing responsible citizens who would continue to pay it forward for future generations. The struggles and triumphs throughout the experience were a testament to the student's growth and mine. Witnessing the struggles and triumphs of the students throughout their journey was a truly rewarding experience for me as their instructor. Seeing how they embraced challenges and overcame obstacles was inspiring, demonstrating their resilience and determination. Their growth was evident not only in their communication skills but also in their confidence, problem-solving abilities, and empathy towards others.

In essence, teaching the Ushah in Action courses has been a transformative experience for my students and me. Going through the ups and downs, my students learnt first-hand the impact they could have on the lives of others. As they witnessed the positive changes they were making, their passion for giving back grew stronger. By educating my students on their actions' influence on others, I hope I have somewhat ingrained in them the value of community engagement and instilled a sense of empathy and compassion by encouraging my students to show kindness without anticipating anything in return. When we devote our time and efforts to improve the lives of others, we have the potential to have an impact that extends well beyond our local communities. Moving forward, I will continue to educate my students the values of giving back to others, the power of our actions and the importance of giving back to our communities. I hope that the ripple effect of positive change will continue to spread, creating a better future for all.

“What really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership.”

-Robert D. Putnam



Happy faces: My student receiving an award at the symposium.



In focus: One of the sessions with my students



Paying it forward: Gutta Percha tree planting programme @IIUM