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Reclaiming our university for all, including stateless children: one step closer

👤 Guest Submission 📅 August 13, 2022 💬 No Comments

By Dr. Siti Nurnadilla Mohamad Jamil

The Break the Barriers (BtB) International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Flagship 2.0 team is humbled to receive the Community Engagement (Gold) Award (AHAS KIRKHS Takrim 2022), and be recognized as the Most Promising Flagship Project (IIUM Takrim 2022) in July 2022.

While we are truly inspired by all the other high-impact IIUM Flagship 2.0 initiatives, we believe that the award and recognition given to BtB are a manifestation of the university's serious commitment and support for reform (Iṣlāḥ), reconstruction (i`ādatul-binā') and renewal (tajdīd) of the status quo by upholding the right of every child to have access to (higher) education, including stateless children.

The world's first university, al-Qarawiyyin, was established by Fatima Al-Fihri in 859 CE because she wanted a school for *all*, where *anyone* could study and become whatever they wanted to be, like teachers, scientists and doctors. And now, 1161 years later, when we started our first small project with children at Buku Jalanan Chow Kit (BJCK), it broke our hearts to learn how some children are still denied access to school, making university just another distant dream. We are all guilty as charged for letting these children's futures be continuously robbed, for too long now. And in 2022, we have not even found ways to address this situation.

Yes, to date, among others, we have the Zero Reject (2019) policy, a response to the frameworks and targets set out in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Yes, of course, we have been talking about the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) in Education, of which Malaysia is one of many countries that are signatories.

Yes, Malaysia has certainly approved Article 28 of the UN's (1948) Right to Education (RTE), which is known as the universal right for *all* children, as proposed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC).

Yes, the 2030 Agenda fully recognizes migration and displacement as core development challenges. Unfortunately, even with these policies, declarations and agendas alike, Malaysia is still reserving that particular provision concerned with access to education, let alone higher education, as it clashes with Article 12 of the Federal constitution which only guarantees the rights of Malaysian citizens. So, when we say, “no child left behind”, we in Malaysia have not yet really reached that goal in its entirety.

They are still many stateless, undocumented children who, even today, remain ghosts wandering around the country, invisible to our system. They continue to be excluded; but they neither cause nor maintain their exclusion, it almost always as a consequence of exclusionary conditions not of their making. Hence, there is the urgent need for a bigger educational transformative mission to address our tendency to practise selective inclusion while these stateless children continue to be marginalised in our country.

Borrowing our Rector's, Prof. Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Bin Abdul Razak, ideal; changes and transformation must be made in totality, rather than piece-meal. Whether we like it or not, these children are also the future of this country. As Prof. Matt Gibney, of the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, puts it, the stateless are perhaps better described not as 'citizens of nowhere' but as 'unrecognised citizens' who have a place in this world, a country of their own, but this country does not recognise them as its nationals.

At this point, instead of wasting the nation's capital to keep these stateless children in detention centres, it is better to allocate funding to free them from this cycle. These children have so much potential, so much talent, just like our own children. Because, at the end of the day, statelessness means a waste of individual potential that is already part of us, of human

capital and of development opportunities. For development to be sustainable (and human rights to be universally enjoyed), statelessness must be solved. And we believe that one of the ways to break the cycle of statelessness is via education. These children's equal access to pursue their ambitions must be reclaimed. If development matters, then statelessness matters. This may be interpreted differently from a legal perspective, but we know that every human life is worth the same and deserves the same chance in life. Allowing them equal access to higher education is the best chance they can have to end their statelessness – for themselves, and for the rest of us. We cannot think of anywhere else to begin other than here, at a university like the IIUM, the garden of knowledge and virtue. My BtB team and I believe that when the university recognizes these children as members of society potential contributing to it, then we are already one step ahead.

This is crucial to note, especially with the constant obsession of many other universities with rankings and being 'the best in the world', instead of being 'the best *for* the world', creating pathologically autopoietic higher education institutions: a state where a university only sees the world in its own terms, its own sense of itself, to the point where it becomes mostly interested in itself and forgets *why* it exists. Etymologically, the word 'university' is derived from the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, which is what to be a whole community of scholars and intellectuals working as one to enhance knowledge and have an impact on the world. It is a tragedy when the role of a university contradicts its purpose.

Here, we take pride in the IIUM for championing sustainability and humanity via the university's Sejahtera agenda. It shows how it leads the way (and the world) with a strong sense of purpose, i.e., our reason for being; the reason for which something exists, and the reason it is done. It is such a joy to see how this university has started to use its power, resources, people, incredible intellect and even our physical campuses in Gombak, Pagoh, Kuantan and Gambang to make a positive impact in the world. IIUM is truly the epitome of a purpose-driven university that utilises its resources, knowledge, talent and people to continuously and intentionally

contribute to the local, marginalised, and neglected communities and the environment in which it operates; through research studies, education, programmes, service and engagement.

We may not be able to thank everyone who has been supporting us since Day 1, but a special thank you goes first and foremost to the Office for Strategy and Institutional Change (OSIC), our flagship champion, Prof. Dr Ahmad Faris bin Ismail, the AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (AHAS KIRKHS), especially our Dean, Prof. Dr Shukran Bin Abd Rahman and Dr Mohd Noh Bin Abdul Jalil who approved and supported our initial proposals, and colleagues from the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL).

Our first sponsors who believe in us and trusted us enough to give us funds when all we had was a plan:

- Dr Muhammad Adli Bin Musa
- Academic Staff Association (ASA) Members
- Dr Wan Norhana Wan Abd Rahman
- Kulliyah of Engineering ladies
- Dr Maskanah Mohammad Lotfie
- Br. Shamsul Rijal Abdullah

Our amazing tutors:

- Sr. Nur Asshiddiqah Abd Ra'uf, KOED
- Sr. Nurin Zahirah Azman, BENL, AHAS KIRKHS
- Sr. Ainin Sofiya Sharudin, BENL, AHAS KIRKHS
- Sr. Nurin Afiqah Abdul Aziz, BENL, AHAS KIRKHS
- Sr. Nurul Masita Soleha bt Mustofa. KOED
- Sr. Wan Nur Fatinah Ghazali. KENMS

Our expert trainers:

- Cikgu Mohd. Senu Bin Awang
- Dr Rozailin Hj Abdul Rahman
- Encik Mohd Zullutfi Abd Razak (PLF Coach Ejul Lutfi)
- Encik Mohd Asri Mohd Azhar (Coach Asri)

Our collaborators and partners:

- Buku Jalanan Chow Kit, special thanks to Cikgu Rahayu Baharin, Cikgu Farid Abd Alim, Cikgu Felicia Yoon (ARUS)
- Cikgu Nurul Atiqah Binti Mohd Nori (IPG Terengganu)

Our esteemed members and friends:

- Assoc. Prof. Dr Isham Pawan Ahmad (who introduced us to Dr Muhammad Irwan Ariffin and Prof. Dr Gairuzazmi Bin Mat Ghani)
- Dr Ainul Azmin Md Zamin
- Assoc. Prof. Dr Aimillia Binti Mohd Ramli
- Assoc. Prof. Dr Zainal Abidin Sanusi and the Sejahtera Centre
- The Student Affairs and Development Division (STADD), especially Tuan Kamaruddin Abd Hamid and Madam Jalilah Binti Abdul Ghani

Last but not least, I want to thank Madam Norazah Binti. Md. Idrus and Dr Tengku Nordayana Akma Binti Tuan Kamaruddin (*orang-orang kuat BtB*): let's not stop until at least a door is created, or barriers are broken down!

Get in touch if you want to come on board! Email us at: breakthebarriers@iium.edu.my.

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