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Caring for mankind and the planet

Live&Learn

HEIs must cultivate planetary health mindset in youth

PLANETARY health is a term that denotes the interconnectedness between the well-being of the planet and its ecosystems and the health of mankind.

Last year, Malaysia launched the National Planetary Health Action Plan, which strives to advance science-based measures for the protection of human and environmental health.

Ours is the first nation in the world to embark on such a plan, working to realign development within planetary boundaries under the purview of policymakers, scientists, industry, society and youth.

Clearly, the government understands the need to instil planetary health consciousness in young Malaysians.

To this end, environmental awareness will become part of the national school curriculum to educate children in ecological values and social consciousness from primary to tertiary levels, while the Higher Education Blueprint 2026-2035 strives to produce more adaptive and solutions-based learners who can cope in a world that has moved from an industrial to a knowledge-based model.

To develop students with a planetary health mindset, higher education institutions (HEIs) must encourage their learners to go beyond linear thinking and instil in them the understanding that they will become responsi-



A united push: Collaboration and cooperation are the way forward where planetary health is concerned. — 123rf.com

ble not just for mankind, but also for the full ecology of the planet.

Students have to see that they are not in a silo by themselves, as the push towards becoming a nation of solution providers must be led by young people who are able to relate to the hardships and challenges caused by adverse weather conditions and other environmental factors.

This relatability to planetary health is part of educational institutions' move to "un-silo" planetary health measures. One person turning off the lights at home, sorting recyclables, and reusing instead of buying may

not feel that they are making much impact, but if 32 million people do these things, it can create a wave of change.

Collaboration and cooperation are the way forward where planetary health is concerned. Generations Z, Alpha and Beta will need collective and generational wisdom to discern what should be done versus what can be done, thus balancing economic progress with social good.

Higher education should cultivate the ability to understand the culture of different subsets of people, and the skill to engage with them in ways they can understand. The public cares about the environment but

struggles with the concept of planetary health.

Students must thus use what they have learnt to engage with citizens from all walks of life – from the *pisang goreng* seller to the gig worker – and de-jargonise explanations and concepts, thus moving from being problem solvers to solution providers.

Values-driven sustainability

Part of the role of higher education is to amplify the importance of values to young people, so they are aware that for economic progress to continue, societal well-being is paramount.

When students draw on internalised values – the external norms, standards or beliefs that they adopt, accept and integrate into their own identity and nature – they are intrinsically motivated and better able to commit to becoming preservers of the country's biodiversity and environment.

Compassion, ethics and values are learnt in childhood, but revisited in higher education, where they are paired with integrity, trust and a deeper knowledge of the interplay between humans and the earth.

This is why graduates must know the importance of research. When they propose sustainability solutions to com-

munities, there is also a need to be aware of the impact of those solutions as well as their feasibility in relation to planetary health and the values of the community they are assisting.

HEIs must also go beyond lip service when advocating for planetary health.

These days, every campus has a sustainability office, but it is what a university really does – enforcing a blanket ban on single-use water bottles at functions, not using plastic flowers as decoration, or mandating online meetings instead of making attendees drive – that shows students the organisation is serious about planetary health.

After all, a university that prioritises planetary health in its operations stands a better chance of educating learners on the importance of planetary health activism.

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