

Academic Expectations of MARA Stakeholders on the Ulul Albab Curriculum at a MARA Junior Science College

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ABSTRACT

Ulul Albab is an educational programme of integration between the existing programmes in the MARA Junior Science College (MRSM) with the religious school programme including Tahfiz Al-Quran. The MRSM Ulul Albab education programme is designed to produce professional experts, entrepreneurs and technocrats that are well versed in the field of religion that is based on Al-Quran and *Sunnah* known as the Ulul Albab generation. This study aims to explore stakeholders' expectations on the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra, Besut Terengganu towards students' academic excellence. The methodology used was qualitative in nature in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted with the four MARA stakeholders. Regarding the validity and reliability of data, several techniques were employed such as member checking, rich thick description, clarification of researcher bias, peer review and debriefing, and external audit. The findings from this study indicate that the stakeholders hope that Ulul Albab programme will be able to produce academically excellent students who possess creative and critical thinking skills. Apart from that, the stakeholders also expressed the need towards education that is balanced in both *duniawi* (world) and *ukhrawi* (hereafter).

Keywords: Ulul Albab, stakeholders, expectations

INTRODUCTION

Ulul Albab programme is originally an idea and inspiration of MARA chairman, YB Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh as an attempt to integrate Islamic education into all curriculum programmes in schools. This is an educational programme of integration between the existing programme in MARA Junior Science College (MRSM) with the religious school programme including Tahfiz Al-Quran. The MRSM Ulul Albab education programme is designed to produce professional experts, entrepreneurs and technocrats that are well versed in the field of religion. The

knowledge on al-Quran and *Sunnah* will be used as the basis in building the Ulul Albab generation. This generation is not only knowledgeable and skilled but also possesses good qualities namely devotion, noble, responsible and committed to the religion, nation and state. Accordingly, MRSM Kota Putra, Besut Terengganu Malaysia has been selected as the pioneer of the programme and currently this programme is also implemented in two other MRSMs which are MRSM Kepala Batas, Pulau Pinang and MRSM Gemencheh, Negeri Sembilan.

In general, the word “Ulul Albab” is attributed to a group of individuals who possess the characteristics of Ulul Albab as mentioned in the Al-Quran. The term Ulul Albab in the Quran has demonstrated its values, greatness and importance to Muslims in particular and to mankind at large. According to the Quranic translation, Ulul Albab is defined as “those who understand” (*orang yang berakal*) and “those who have a mind” (*orang yang mempunyai fikiran*). Meanwhile, Al-Marbawi Dictionary states that Ulul Albab is originally derived from two-words which are Ulu and Al-Albab. Ulu means “who have” (*yang mempunyai*), while Al-Albab is a plural form from the word “lubb”, which stands for “the essence of something” (*pati sesuatu*), “pure mind” (*akal yang bersih*) and “heart” (*hati*).

Imam Ibn Kathir in his interpretation has illustrated Ulul Albab as those who have pure and ideal thoughts and are able to understand meanings in a right way. Ultimately they will discover the truth that could save them in the world and hereafter. In order to achieve this, they have to develop a mature mind until they are able to distinguish between right and wrong, between good and bad and between beneficial and futile. These are deemed necessary in the eyes of Allah in developing an Ulul Albab individual as stated in surah *al-Zumar*:

Therefore reveal to My servants. (They are) those who make a great effort to listen to the words (which conveyed) and they follow the words; those are the people who have been given guidance by Allah and they are Ulul Albab.

There are various definitions related to Ulul Albab, raised by philosophers based on their point of views. Idris (2006) as cited in Wan Mariana & Mohd Shafiee (2012), defined Ulul Albab as individuals with strong foundation of Al-Quran, extensive and diverse knowledge as well as the ability to think and observe events of God's creation through the eyes and sharp minds and eventually learn from it.

Meanwhile, Shahrani (2006) asserted that Ulul Albab is a group of people who are given privileges by Allah s.w.t, in which those that are given wisdom and knowledge. Osman (2006) highlighted that Ulul Albab are encyclopedic scholars (*ulamak ensiklopedik*) who are the most important individuals who spread the spirit of Islam and mold Islamic civilization based on their ability to master various fields of knowledge (Wan Mariana & Mohd Shafiee, 2012).

In his book entitled ‘*Generasi Ulul Albab Segunung Harapan Seteguh Gagasan*’, Sabri (2009) had listed several viewpoints regarding the definition of Ulul Albab from various Islamic scholars’ perspectives. One of them is the former Perlis mufti, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin who has defined Ulul Albab as those who possess wisdom and a mature understanding that allows them

to make accurate judgments. His notion is supported by Abdullah (2006) which states that Ulul Albab are those who are wise and possess knowledge in the field of *fardhu ain* and *fardhu kifayah*. Meanwhile, according to Danial Zainal Abidin (2007) the term Ulul Albab portrays individuals who think deeply and are able to put all things in the right perspectives. In addition, these individuals live out the concept of remembrance and thought by chanting and glorifying Allah through observation of God's creation (Sabri, 2009).

From these definitions, it can be concluded that the concept of Ulul Albab serves as an important paradigm in every action based on deep mastery of knowledge which can be applied in any circumstances and challenges faced by the Muslim communities in particular and the world in general. Therefore, there is a need to integrate the concept of Ulul Albab in the Malaysian education system in order to produce the ideal human being (*insan kamil*).

With the intention of upholding the ideals of Islamic and holistic education as indicated in the National Philosophy of Education through the curriculum, MRSM has implemented Ulul Albab programme which integrated three important components namely *Quranik*, *Ensiklopedik* and *Ijtihadik*. Ulul Albab programme emphasizes a different teaching and learning process that places a strong emphasis on the Quran. The main objective of the implementation of Ulul Albab programme is to produce an Ulul Albab generation which possesses three characteristics which are *Quranik*, *Ensiklopedik* and *Ijtihadik*. Students in this programme are required to memorize 30 constituents of the Quran and understand the concept of read, remember, understand, think, practice and disseminate. The target of memorization is 30 *juz'* Al-Quran in a 3-year period.

Apart from producing an Al-Quran generation, the Ulul Albab programme also seeks to develop an encyclopedic generation. According to Idris (2008), encyclopedic generations are those who acquire various disciplines (multidisciplinary) and various types of language (multilingual) as well as are highly skilled in becoming a key source of reference to the community. In the pursuit of materializing an encyclopedic generation, students are required to learn other languages such as Japanese and Mandarin.

Apart from that, in this era of globalization, technology in general and the Information & Communication Technology (ICT) in particular have become one of the significant tools in enhancing the teaching and learning processes. Therefore, students are also equipped with the most recent ICT resources and multimedia facilities to assist their learning process. Idris (2008) asserted that *ijtihadi* education could be defined as an educational process that is able to produce intellectuals and Muslim scientists who are creative, determined and willing to try new things and generate new ideas for the betterment of mankind. In addition, the *ijtihadi* generation is able to think and make correct judgment and is capable of solving crisis faced by society. With the intention of producing an *ijtihadi* generation, students are encouraged to take part in extra co-curricular activities in order to enhance their character, intellect and physical development of students. Additionally, the Ulul Albab programme is also integrating three main extra-curricular activities; horseback riding, swimming, and archery. Figure 1 illustrates the whole concept of the Ulul Albab programme.

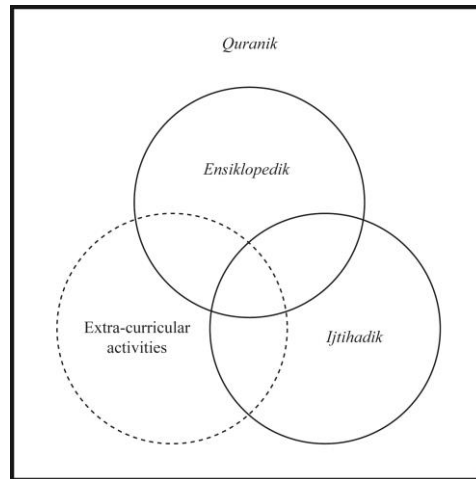


Figure 1. The Ulul Albab Curriculum Model

After five years of implementation of the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of the Ulul Albab programme in producing professional experts, entrepreneurs and technocrats that are well versed in the Quran as well as portraying and practicing the values of Islam. Therefore, this study aims to explore Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) stakeholders' expectations towards students' academic performance at MRSM Kota Putra.

Responsive Evaluation Model: Determination of Stakeholder Expectation

The evaluation of the curriculum is crucial to determine whether the existing curriculum should be revised, maintained or replaced, help refine instruction and learning, and decide whether the existing managerial organization of the programme should be sustained or restructured (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009). In order to holistically understand and evaluate the success of the curriculum, a responsive evaluation model was adopted in this study. The responsive evaluation model is based explicitly on the assumption that the concerns of the stakeholders are crucial in determining the evaluation issues and to see that the expectations of the stakeholders are met. According to Guba & Lincoln (1989), stakeholders could be defined as “persons with some common characteristics (administrators, instructors, students, sponsors) who have a stake in the performance (outcome or impact) of the programme being evaluated” (Curran et al., 2003). A responsive evaluation explores the expectations of the programme stakeholders and those expectations are used in evaluating the merit and worth of the educational programme as well as become the basis for the formulation of standards and criteria for the programme that is being evaluated (Curran et al., 2003). Therefore, an evaluation of the stakeholders' expectation on the Ulul Albab curriculum is desirable.

There are eight steps in conducting the responsive evaluation model. In the context of this study, the researcher only adopted the first two steps of the model; (a) the evaluator first met with the clients, staff, and audiences to gain insight of their perspectives on the educational programme and (b) the evaluator drew on such discussions and the analysis of any document to

decide the scope of the evaluation project (Glatthorn, 1987). The steps of responsive evaluation model are illustrated in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2. Responsive Evaluation Steps

Stake (1967, 1975, 1976) in Chafel (1981) proposes that an educational evaluation is effective when it is responsive towards the concerns that exist in the minds of the various audiences participating in a programme including stakeholders, school administrators, practitioners, and students. Stake has argued that evaluation results should be more relevant- “more relevant to what is of importance, is happening in learning, in teaching, in administration; more relevant to the concerns of participants and audiences of a particular programme” (Gallagher, 1976).

Stakeholders play an important role in curriculum evaluation. Since they have a stake in the evaluation, their perspectives, interests and expectations need to be taken into account in order to increase the likelihood of the evaluation findings to be accepted and acted upon. Feedback, recommendations, critique and advice from stakeholders will improve the content and implementation of the curriculum so as to meet the expectation of the stakeholders as well as the needs of the learners.

Involving diverse stakeholders during programme evaluation will also deepen the researcher's understanding of the social and political contexts affecting the programme. By doing so, the researcher will become aware of the social and political contexts that will likely have implications on the programme and the evaluation. Collaboration with stakeholders during the evaluation will give the researcher access to a broad range of knowledge, from statistical methods to cultural understanding of the programme (United States Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Spirituality and Academic Performance

There are several prior studies which support that spirituality has a positive impact upon students' academic performance besides their health and well-being. Researchers have demonstrated that students who take the time to commit to spiritual activities could enhance their ability to excel academically. For instance, a study carried out by Hodge (2007), discovered that even though students are absent from classes in order to attend spiritual instruction, they do not gain lower academic scores for missing their classes. Surprisingly, despite missing their class to participate in the spiritual programme, it seems that their academic achievement is improving (Fukofuka, 2007). Another recent study conducted by Jeynes (2009), also demonstrated a positive connection between spirituality and academic performance. The study was carried out to examine the relationship between Bible literacy among secondary school students and their academic performance and school behavior. The findings revealed that students with the highest levels of biblical literacy had higher GPA's and highest ranking in test and grade results. In contrast, students with the lowest level of Bible literacy were found to have the lowest average GPA and the lowest ranking in test and grade results.

Another interesting study carried out by Nawaz (2009) investigated the effects of memorizing Al-Quran by heart (*Hifz*) on the later academic achievement of *Huffaz*. The data analysis from the study found that memorizing al-Quran produced significant improvement in academic performance among *Huffaz*. The findings demonstrate a prominent and significant difference ($p < 0.01$) in academic performance of *Huffaz* before and after *Hifz*. According to Nawaz (2009), knowing the Quran by heart is described as "encoding, storing and retrieving the text of the Quran by practicing and reciting it repeatedly". This process is known as *Hifz*. *Hifz* involves a lot of complex and complicated memory enhanced practices and exercises. Due to this reason, memorizing the Quran by heart enhances brain capacity for other learning and memory-based tasks and practices. This memorizing ability that they possess makes it easier for *Huffaz* to perform other memory based tasks in their learning. Therefore, the study shows that the practice of various brain exercises in memorizing the Quran plays an essential role in acquiring high academic achievement.

In a local study conducted by Salasiah, Rosmawati & Fariza (2012), it was found that spiritual practices have significant correlation with student academic achievement. Those spiritual exercises that are frequently practiced by the students include *solat hajat*, *solat sunat awwabin*, *qiyam al-lail*, reading al-Quran, *tawakkal* and also congregational prayers. Apart from that, the study also revealed that spirituality helps to improve learning motivation because spiritual activities such as reading al-Quran, performing regular prayers and *tawakkal* in Allah SWT encourage and motivate a person to abandon negative qualities such as despair, anxiety and sadness while persistently working hard in pursuit of success. This finding indicated that lack of a proper emphasis on the spiritual aspect may cause lack of learning motivation and the proper learning objective among the students may be side stepped. The study also emphasized the importance of spiritual practice in a student's life, particularly Muslim students and thus it should not be disregarded in one's routine.

Research Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was a combination of both Responsive Evaluation Model and Ulul Albab curriculum model. Focus was given on determining the academic expectations through teaching and learning process from the four main MARA stakeholders; the former MARA Chairman, the Director of MARA Secondary Education Division, the ex-principal of Imtiaz school in Kuala Besut, and the ex-principal of MRSM Ulul Albab Kota Putra. The three main components of Ulul Albab programme portrayed in the theoretical framework act as scope of discussion for this study. Any expectations derived from the stakeholders that are beyond the aspects of *Quranik*, *Ensiklopedik*, and *Ijtihadik* will not be taken into consideration. Figure 3 illustrates the theoretical framework of this study.

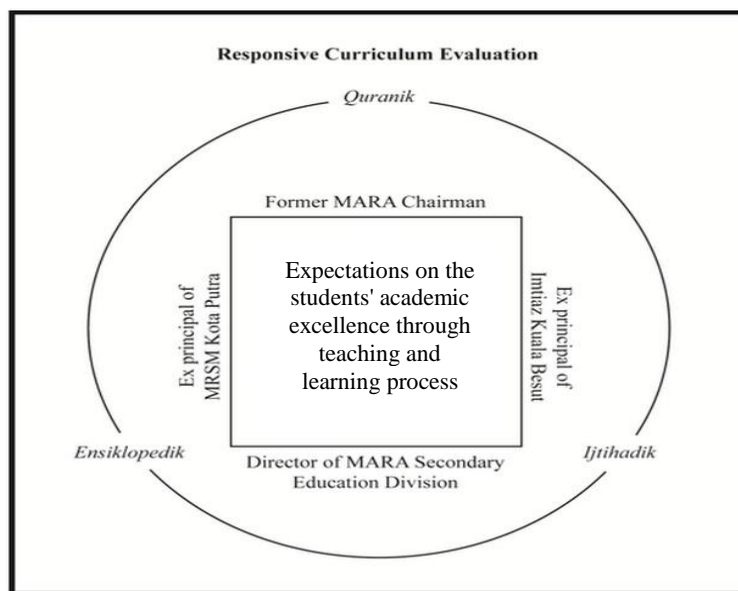


Figure 3. Research theoretical framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study was undertaken to investigate the expectations of MARA stakeholders on the Ulul Albab curriculum at MRSM Kota Putra. This approach allows the researcher to discover the social realities in the natural settings. Qualitative researchers believe that human behaviour is always bound to the context in which it occurs and thus, behaviour needs to be studied holistically in order to obtain a more complete picture of the situation. (Hong, 2007). This concurs with the characteristic of qualitative research emphasized by Ornstein & Hunkins (2009), "humanistic evaluators argue for a more holistic approach to evaluation, one that provides detailed portraits of the situations being evaluated". Employing qualitative methods in this educational research enables the researcher to investigate the stakeholders' beliefs, priorities, perspectives and their expectations of the programme. Humanistic evaluators recognize that individuals have different values, experiences, and abilities and thus, possess different perceptions of "reality". The intention was to capture a glimpse into this reality and to gain insight into 'what is going-on' during the implementation process. This is in line with Bogdan & Biklen (2003, p. 42) who emphasized that qualitative research is "naturalistic, inductive and concerned with process and meaning".

Through discussion with the stakeholders, the researchers were fully able to understand their reasons and beliefs in their vision of the Ulul Albab curriculum. Punch (1998, p. 150), asserts that "qualitative research aims to understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context". Similarly Green & Bricki (2007) affirm that qualitative research aims to answer questions about the 'what', 'how', or 'why' of a phenomenon rather than 'how many' or 'how much', which are answered by quantitative approach. Merriam (2002, p. 6) also states that "qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant's perspective". Therefore, in order to gain insight and understand how a community or individuals perceive a particular issue, qualitative methods are the most appropriate.

The participants for this research were selected through purposive sampling technique. Four MARA stakeholders were purposely selected based on their role in conceptualizing and implementing the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra. They are the former MARA Chairman, the Director of MARA Secondary Education Division, the ex-principal of Imtiaz school in Kuala Besut, and the ex-principal of MRSM Kota Putra.

Table 1 lists the participants involved in this study, along with their roles towards the Ulul Albab programme. Full cooperation was given in semi-structured interviews and discussions that were conducted individually. Consent was given by the four participants prior to the interviews. The stakeholders were assured that their participation is to be kept anonymous. Data collected were transcribed and analyzed using the software *Atlas.ti* version 7. Intensive data coding were used to obtain common themes that emerge in response to the research question. To ensure validity and reliability of data, several techniques were employed such as member checking, rich thick description, clarification of researcher bias, peer review and debriefing, and external audit.

Table 1
 List of participants and their roles in Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra

	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4
Role	Conceptualising and initiating the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra.	Conceptualising and initiating the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra.	Implementing Conceptualising and initiating the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM Kota Putra.	Conceptualising and implementing the Ulul Albab programme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that for academic expectation, two sub-themes were identified namely, (a) academic excellence and producing creative and critical thinking students, and (b) education that is balanced in both *duniawi* (world) and *ukhrawi* (hereafter). Frequency percentage of statements for each sub-theme is displayed in Table 2 below to provide an overview of the main theme.

Table 2
 Distribution of sub-themes for academic expectations

Sub-themes	Number of Citations	Percentage (%)
Academic excellence and producing creative and critical thinking students.	5	83
Education that is balanced in both <i>duniawi</i> (world) and <i>ukhrawi</i> (hereafter)	1	17

Academic Excellence and Producing Creative and Critical Thinking Students

The study found that academic excellence and producing creative and critical thinking students is the dominant expectation of Ulul Albab programme in Kota Putra. This is proven by the statement of informant 1:

We wanted the best for MRSM. They excel in academics.

Academic excellence theme can also be interpreted through several statements that led to outstanding academic performance. This is proven by the statement of informant 4:

Encyclopedic can be defined as mastering various branches of knowledge. Multi-disciplinary and multi-lingual.

Informant 2 also provided indicators of academic excellence through his statement:

We already have science and technology field in MRSM to produce Bumiputera students who are competent in the field of science and technology, it's basic, right.

From the above statements, it can be concluded that through the Ulul Albab programme, the stakeholders hope that the programme will produce students who are excellent in academics as well as competent in the field of Science and Technology. Apart from that, the Ulul Albab programme aims to produce students who think both creatively and critically. This is proven by the statement of informant 4:

We want our students to be creative and innovative. Our programmes must make them think.

He also emphasizes the concept of Ijtihadik when discussing the expectations of MARA stakeholders in developing creative and critical thinking students. This is evidenced by the following statement:

Ijtihadik. Able to give opinion and solve problem. It is more towards brain-based. How he used his mind.

From the above statements, it can be concluded that through Ulul Albab programme, the stakeholder group hopes that the programme will produce creative and critical thinking students who are able to apply knowledge and experience to produce innovative ideas.

Education that is Balanced in Both Duniawi (world) and Ukhrawi (hereafter).

The study found that education that is balanced in both *duniawi* (world) and *ukhrawi* (hereafter) recorded the second highest percentage of the stakeholders' expectations on the Ulul Albab programme in Kota Putra. This is reflected by the statement of informant 4:

Okay, why not we balance up the hereafter and world.

From the above statement, it can be concluded that the stakeholders hope that teaching and learning process is balanced in terms of *duniawi* and *ukhrawi* to attain happiness and success in the here and the hereafter.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Fundamentally, through the Ulul Albab programme, the stakeholders hope that the programme can produce students who are academically excellent as well as competent in the field of Science and Technology. Apart from academic excellence, the stakeholders also hope that the Ulul Albab programme will produce students who are able to think both creatively and critically. The stakeholders believe that both creative and critical thinking skills need to be incorporated in the

Ulul Albab programme in order to produce 21st century problem solvers. It was found that learning creative and critical thinking skills leads students to develop their concentration in learning, improve analytical abilities as well as enhance thought processing (Roekel, 2011). Therefore, teachers can enhance students' learning by providing opportunities for students to apply creative and critical thinking skills in the learning process. Treffinger (2008) states that students who are competent in not only academic subjects but also in creative and critical thinking skills are proven to be lifelong learners, knowledge seekers and creators, and effective problem solvers who can survive in a world of globalization.

Moreover, the stakeholders hope that the teaching and learning process of the Ulul Albab programme is balanced in terms of *duniawi* and *ukhrawi* to attain happiness and success here and hereafter. This concurs with the definition of education from the Islamic perspective given by Hassan (1989), "a lifelong process of preparing an individual to actualize his role as a vicegerent (*Khalifah*) of Allah on earth and thereby, contribute fully to the reconstruction and development of society in order to achieve well-being in this world and hereafter" (Che Noraini & Langgulong, 2008). To achieve this notion, an educational system and its curriculum must be planned according to Islamic worldview.

Overall, this study provides feedback on the stakeholders' expectations of the Ulul Albab programme in MRSM. The MRSM Ulul Albab educational programme is designed to produce professional experts, entrepreneurs and technocrats that are well versed in the field of religion-based Quran and *Sunnah* as Ulul Albab generation. The main objective of this programme is to develop Ulul Albab generations who are balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God and living according to the Quran and *Sunnah*. In order to evaluate whether the programme succeeds in producing Ulul Albab community who have creative and critical thinking abilities and at the same time possess ideal personality, an evaluation of the stakeholders' expectation of the programme needs to be conducted first to see whether their expectations are being met. Representing their needs and interests throughout the implementation of the programme is fundamental to ensure the programme's success.

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