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Ihsan, Innovation and Creativity in Students' Product Innovation: The Case of Innovation Show Event at UiTM Pahang

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Abstract
Innovation and creativity are highly encouraged in Islam. Islam also fortifies Muslims to embed *ihsan*, an Islamic concept of striving to achieve perfection, in all aspect of their lives including when inventing or innovating new products. Innovation, without being bounded by the divine *shariah* guidelines, might lead to destructive innovation, for example, animal or human cloning. In the context of tertiary education, being highly innovative and creative are the indispensable qualities of first-class minded graduates that would help them to compete in the ever challenging job market. Although innovative and creative thinking cannot be taught, it can be nurtured through the activities that the students participate during the course of their study, for instance through them developing their own product innovation. Thus, this research applied a qualitative case study approach in understanding the role of *ihsan* in nurturing innovation and creativity among university students. The case was an innovation show event organized by the Faculty of Business and Management at UiTM Pahang, a semesterly affair where students were given the opportunity to exhibit their product innovations. This study discusses the process of development of the students' product innovation from the initial idea until their participation in the innovation show event and demonstrates how *ihsan* concept plays a significant role in guiding the entire process of innovation. This study finally proposes that encouraging students to

innovate their own products and to practice *ihsan* while doing so, should be one of universities' agenda to foster the culture of innovation and creativity among university students.
Keywords: Outdoor Learning, Student's Product Innovation, Ihsan Innovation, Creativity

Introduction

Innovation and creativity are two extremely important skills as they can bring progress and make life better. In the context of education, the implementation of new, interesting, unique, and helpful teaching and learning environment is considered an innovation, and could strategically enhance students' knowledge acquisition. Through the Strategic Plan for Higher Education Beyond 2020, which was introduced a decade ago in 2007, the Government of Malaysia had long recognized the development of human capital who possesses the first class mentality and who are capable to use their knowledge, as well as the technical and managerial skills in a proactive, creative and innovative manner aimed at addressing the changes of global environment. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, as well as other agencies under its regulatory encourage more activities to be conducted, that could lead to creation of innovative ideas and products among teachers and students in solving a variety of problems involving the Learning and Teaching (P & P) in schools and universities (Rosmin, Rosmin & Mustaamal, 2017).

Innovation and creativity are also highly encouraged in Islam. From the Islamic perspective, all conducts of human in all aspects of their lives must be guided by the divine rules and regulations of the Islamic law or *shariah*. As such, in the context of innovation, innovating without following the *shariah* guidelines or without being bounded by the stipulated rules and regulation could lead to harmful consequences and destructive innovations, for example human and animal cloning. In addition, Muslims are ordained to practice *ihsan* at all times and embed it in everything that they do, including when inventing or innovating new products. *Ihsan* can be defined as finding the best way to do something which could give benefis to others, including other human, as well as flora and fauna (Isgandarova & O'Connor, 2014). In term of fulfilling a religious obligation, having *ihsan* denotes one's commitment to do their best as if he could see God, based on a hadith by the Prophet Muhammad SWT (Ayoub, 2005). Similarly, in the context of performing the daily or worldly tasks, including while innovating a product, *ihsan* can be considered: How can a new product created in the best way possible? Or is its enhancement can give benefit to the society? Is this product can help to facilitate or improve our daily work? Does it increase the efficiency of the users? Or is this product helpful to solve a pressing problem faced by members of the society?

Innovation and creativity are also among the required skills and qualities of first-class minded graduates' in order to prepare them to compete in the ever challenging job market. Unemployment and low employability among graduates are among the issues that are still impending within the job market. As the numbers of graduates who fail to get a job are on the increase, this trend is indeed worrying. One of the contributing factors of students having this predicament is due to the lack of innovation and creativity among themselves, i.e., the university graduates. According to the 2015's tracer study report of graduates' employability that has been published by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, 24% of the total students who graduated that year were still unemployed. Furthermore, although courses on innovation and creativity are

being introduced at universities, but to actually induce students to be more inclined to think innovatively and with creativity, is a big challenge. Although innovative and creative thinking cannot be taught, it can be nurtured indirectly for example through the activities that the students participate during the course of their study. One of such activities to foster students' creativity and innovativeness is through the students developing their own product innovation; hence giving them the exposure and hands on experience on undergoing the entire innovation process from idea generation to innovation diffusion. Students' activities can be a powerful learning tool compared to classroom teaching, due to need for collaboration and cooperation with one another, including among fellow students as well as with other faculty members and staff and with another. Simmons (2012), for example, described the importance of faculty members talking with each other, sharing teaching ideas and challenges (Simmons, 2012). These kinds of collaborative conversations encourage an atmosphere of safety and the ability to take risks.

In order to encourage the fruition of creative brainchilds of students' own, the Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM Pahang had been organizing an activity to give the opportunity for students to showcase their innovations, called 'Innovation Show'. This paper will further describe this event as a case study with the following objectives: 1) to understand the process of the development of students' product innovation in nurturing their innovative and creative thinking, and 2) to understand the role of *ihsan* in nurturing innovation and creativity among university students.

Literature Review

Innovation and Creativity

Innovation and creativity are two buzz words of the higher education. According to *Kamus Dewan*, the most reputable Malaysian dictionary, innovation means something new that is being introduced, which includes methods, systems, customs and others. Hussin and Asimiran (2012) defined innovation as the renewal, modification, or repair of ideas, objects, knowledge and creation of cultural civilization with the purpose of fulfilling certain functions or to meet the tastes of specific or meet specific market. Reimers-Hild and King (2009) described the components of innovation as fun, creative, diverse, collaborative, and intuitive. Taking small steps to accomplish this goal is the way to go, but there is a need for additional support and encouragement. Meanwhile, creativity is defined as the ability or the power to create creative abilities. Creative is also defined as the ability to create, produce and develop new ideas or something that did not exist before. Petrulytė (2011), for instance, relates creativity to personality traits such as self-confidence, diligence, curiosity and general intellectual activity, criticism, boldness, tendency to individual work and independence, and has been defined as the personality structure, which consists of motives, interests, moral values, experiences, abilities, feelings and needs (Petrulytė, 2011; Jovaiša, 2007).

Within the academic field, creativity refers to a process of thought that generally encourage new ideas. It involves a combination of new and existing ideas that are reprocessed, re-selected and switched into a new one. Meanwhile, innovation is an idea, practice or object that is considered to be new and better. Creative innovations that are produced by man can build new trend and

maximizes the opportunities even in the most hostile and competitive ecosystems. Innovation and creativity outside the classroom can be applied indirectly through teaching and learning activities that are deliberately planned. It is generally agreed that nurturing 'creative graduates' is very essential especially in order to prepare them into the increasingly competitive market. Drady, Bryans and Mearns (2016), however, noted that a 'hole' exists in current business education, where creativity should have thrived along the study duration as one of the mainstream elements in the curriculum, but the level of creativity of the business students were still low. In a research on entrepreneurship and creativity at an applied science university in Lithuania, the researchers sought to find out whether the faculty's method of teaching encourages openness and creativity among the students. The result shows that the outdoor learning subjects had indeed contributed to developing the students' entrepreneurial and creativity skills compared to conventional in-classroom subjects (Samašonok, Petrulytė & Staškienė, 2016).

Ihsan Concept

In general, the concept of *ihsan* refers to a benevolent deed or a good job that is being implemented correctly or skillfully or with efficiency, with the aim of achieving perfection. It refers to doing things with high quality, and extra care (Maqsood & Waris, 2016). In simple sense, *ihsan* is an Arabic term meaning that denotes 'perfection' or 'excellence' (from the root word *husn* meaning 'beautiful' or 'good'). *Ihsan* is a concept that is highly recommended in Islam; and Muslims would gain the pleasure of Allah by observing and applying it in their daily lives. As such, from the Islamic point of view, observing *ihsan* is an act of worship as ordered by Allah.

Because *ihsan* originates as a command of Allah (although not compulsory in the sense that Muslims are not being penalized should they omit it), *ihsan* involves taking one's inner faith (iman) and showing it in both deed and action. As the concept of *ihsan* also includes the act of doing good deeds for the sake of or for the benefit of others, it is also closely related to the concept of social responsibility, borne from religious convictions (Maqsood & Waris, 2016). Among the examples mentioned in this tradition is the importance of animal slaughter (for halal food) carried out with the utmost care and compassion, caring and perfect; taking into the consideration even the welfare of the animals themselves.

The concept of *ihsan* has been mentioned in the Qur'an. For example in Surah al-Qasas [28:77]: "But seek, through what Allah has given you, the home (of) the Hereafter, and (do) not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has been good to you. And (do) not seek corruption in the earth. Indeed, Allah (does) not love the corrupters". This shows that man must do good as Allah has been good to him, help people in need and let no one do mischief on the earth or creatures of God (Ibn-Kathir, 2000).

Surah An- Nahl [16:90] of the Holy Qur'an also mentioned about *ihsan* concept: "Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded" (Ibn-Kathir, 2000). This verse shows that *ihsan* concept can be described in two senses: (1) give pleasure (kindness) to others and (2) do the work diligently and earnestly. According to Mohamed, Ghani, and Basir

(2011), the concept of *ihsan* has two important elements: First, *ihsan* means 'something that is best and most beautiful'. Second, it refers 'to do something for quality, through being fully mindful and aware that every man's action and movement is within the observation and evaluation of Allah S.W.T'.

Therefore, the concept of *ihsan* is very important in one's daily lives, especially for Muslims. In the context of career and administration, this aspect is often expressed as 'professionalism' or high work efficiency or work quality. Applying *ihsan* means implies the accuracy, perfection, precision or completeness of any job done. Therefore, a person who observes *ihsan* at work is constantly improving the quality of the work. Whereas for practicing Muslim, observing *ihsan* means that he would be constantly improving the practice of his worship.

***Ihsan* and Innovation**

Past literature had linked *ihsan* with innovation. For example, in a study on the concept of creativity and innovation from the Islamic perspective which had involved the students of an Islamic university in Malaysia, the researchers found that cultivating the concepts of creativity and innovation is necessary in contemporary Islamic educational system; in fact, it should be considered as a crucial tool for present youngsters in the era of knowledge and innovation (Mohamad et al., 2012).

In the context of education, the implementation of new, interesting, unique, perhaps strange yet helpful teaching and learning methods could instill the students with the interest to acquire knowledge. Within the context of Islamic creativity, some researchers are calling for the reassessment of the role of *bid'ah* or innovation in creating a creative and innovative Muslim society; which can be achieved through understanding the relevant conceptual frameworks. The researchers also found that *bid'ah* had indeed played a role in the advancement of Islamic civilization (Zarif et al., 2013). In fact, according to Adham et al. (2012) who investigated the concepts of technological innovation and entrepreneurship from the Western and Islamic perspectives, the conceptualization of Islamic perspective on innovation and entrepreneurship process had supported the efforts of inventors and entrepreneur-managers to achieve the worldly economic benefits that would ultimately enable them to attain the blessings of Allah. In this sense, each conduct of Muslims must be carried out with a) *ikhlas*, i.e., without any ulterior motive other than to gain the pleasure of Allah, and b) *ihsan* i.e., earnestly.

Within the context of tertiary education, it has been suggested that the concept of creativity and innovation among tertiary students can only be nurtured through developing a condusive culture of the same (Jantan, 2016). Such culture, in turn, can be nurtured through effective programs and interventions. In their study of an empowerment and entrenchment program on creativity and innovation among Malaysian polytechnic students, the role of *ihsan* in influencing the students to produce high quality and innovative projects, can be inferred. According to the researchers, such programs have been proven to be an effective means to foster the creative and innovative culture among the students.

The Innovation Show Event at UiTM Pahang

Innovation Show is an event organized by the students of the Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia (UiTM) of Pahang Campus, as a part of their course requirement. The students were required to take Creative and Critical Thinking (CCT) subject, which was a compulsory course for all second year Diploma in Business Studies students. The objective of the subject was to encourage the students to apply the thinking skills in different kind of academic process rather than lecture in the classroom. There was no final examination for this subject; the grading was made merely based on continuous assessment which included individual and group assignments. The students were also required to organize an event as to showcase their teamwork and leadership skills.

Innovation Show was also a platform for the students to display and present their product innovation projects to the mass, i.e., to the judges and the audience. The students were required to develop a product as a group project. The briefing of the program, as well as the projects was given well in advance, namely, at the beginning of the semester. The students were, in fact, were able to commence their projects as early as possible, but due to other commitments for other courses, most students began their projects approximately two months before the showcase.

The students were divided into small groups that consisted of three to four members. Each groups were required to pitch an idea to produce a product that can solve a problem that one may encounter in daily life. This stage of identification of problems is in fact an important stage that would guide the students to innovate a good product. As the students involved in this program were from a business faculty, they were not expected to propose a highly technical or to apply high technology in their products.

In the context of real business world, most of successful business ideas are meant to solve the problems faced by their customers. A problematic or difficult situation thus could be turn into profitable business opportunities, should one is critical, creative and innovative enough to recognize and tap on the opportunity. Therefore, the innovation project was planned as a training ground for the students to develop their skills to observe and to identify business opportunities based on their ability to assess their surroundings. The ability to identify an opportunity, and to appropriately grab it and turn it to commercialization is a skill that is imperative for any successful innovator.

The guidelines for the project were provided by a lecturer in charge for the course, who also would follow through to facilitate the implementation as well as the assessment of the project. Discussions about the project began in the classroom right from the first meeting as the students were first required to pitch the ideas, which could be improved throughout the course of the semester. The lecturer in charge was also responsible to approve the initial idea and design of each product before the students were allowed to proceed with their projects. The projects had been completed in stages during the class hours.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design. We analyzed three of the innovation products that had been featured in the Innovation Show event as the cases, and they formed the units of analysis for this study. We interviewed the students of UiTM Pahang who were the members of each of the participant-groups of the program; each group as the representative the products that had competed in the event. All students involved in this study had enrolled in the CCT subject for the semester ending May 2017. The descriptions of the innovation products are tabulated in Table 1. All names identifiable to the participants of the program had been disguised in order to protect the anonymity of the informants.

TABLE 1 INNOVATION PRODUCTS INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY

Product's Name	Features of Innovation Products
Alpha	A self-feeding ecological home aquarium
Beta	A trolley that can be used to climb stairs
Gamma	A folding chair for left-handed people

After each interview session, the recorded audio was transcribed in verbatim in order to prepare it for the data analysis. The analysis of the interview transcript of each case was done immediately after each interview had been transcribed, before we proceeded to the next interview or case. As such, the data collection and data analysis for this study was performed simultaneously; with previous interview data served to guide for the second and subsequent interviews. After several interview sessions, some recurring patterns of data could be traced, indicating that the data saturation had possibly been achieved. At that point, we then concluded the data collection. Each informant was formally met at least once via a face-to-face interview; while the follow up interviews were conducted via emails and personal messages, in which we sought additional information and confirmation of data.

The interview transcripts were analyzed with the help of a CAQDAS (computer aided qualitative data analysis software) namely ATLAS.ti. We applied the processual approach of analysis (Pettigrew, 1997) in order to enable us to fully understand the process of product innovation for each of the product. In this study, we scrutinized the product innovation process that started with the initial idea, and ended with 'commercialization', namely when the product successfully participated in the Innovation Show event. Based on the analysis of each of the cases, followed by the cross-case analysis of the three cases following Yin (1994), we collapsed the patterns, trends and salient dimensions that had emerged from the study's findings into a diagram of the process involved in the product innovation development.

Findings

Based on our analysis, the students had gone through five major processes in developing their product innovation, as shown in Figure 1.

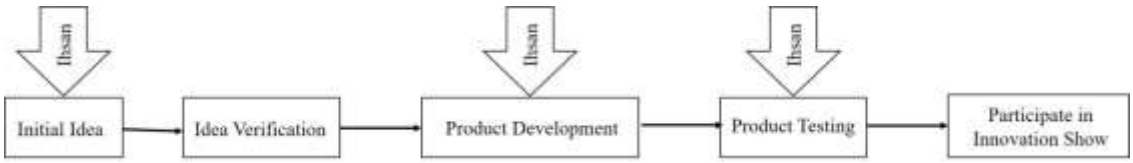

FIG. 1 THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRODUCT INNOVATION

During the first phase, namely the initial idea development, we found that indeed the *ihsan* concept had been practiced by the students. While deciding for the product that they had planned to innovate, the students thought about how they can do their best to develop the product, as well how the product could benefit others. They started to initiate two or three new ideas of solving daily problems that they had faced themselves, or the problems that had been faced by the people that they know. The students also had conducted library searches in order to support their initial ideas. These library searches were compiled in the form of literature reviews, which were also sourced from newspaper articles and journal articles that had been published in recent years (within 2013 – 2017). They also had turned to internet searches in order to establish the novelty of their ideas and to ensure that their products are not something that are already available in the market.

For instance, the spirit of *ihsan* is evident in this quote from one of the informants:

> *"We made a number of discussions before agreed to develop Beta. We have to make sure it is the best idea to solve our problem… real problems."* (Adam).

The second phase of the process of developing the innovation was idea verification stage. It was the stage when the lecturer-mentor in charge had an intervention. Using her expertise and experience, the lecturer gave suggestions to enable the students to reassess and improvise their ideas so that they are not only novel, but doable and marketable. The lecturer debated with the students regarding the ideas; encouraging them to justify their decisions and defend their ideas. For each of 'unsuccessful' initial idea pitch, the students were required to come out with another new idea. It means that the process of development in these two stages is iterative, where the students could go back and forth in getting their ideas approved.

> *"Madam gave a lot of suggestions to improve to our idea [pause] many times she had rejected our ideas…. But we know she did that so we can come out with the best [idea]… Cream of the cream…"* (Anne).

The third phase was the product development stage, which was considered as crucial as the students had to bring the idea into reality. Because the students were from a business faculty, this feat had proved to be not easy; as they were generally lacking in the technical skills and expertise, or even designing. As a result, most of the students had sought the help from other experts in order to develop their product. These helps were 'hired' and duly paid for their work. For example, Alpha and Gamma were built by high-skilled carpenters, while Beta was developed by a technician from a local vocational institute. The *ihsan* concept had driven the students to

get the best in developing their innovation product. They were willing to incur extra costs in order to ensure that their products were built by experts, hence ensuring the high quality of their products.

> *"We have the idea, but we don't know how to do carpentry work, as we are not wood tech students. So we decided to hire the carpenter. As long as our idea can come true".* (Lynn).

> *"We contacted the expert from that vocational institution from Facebook as we want our product to be the best and usable. The expert verified that our idea is usable and he used AutoCAD to design the trolley [smile]. It is a first time for me… a new experience."* (Adam).

Next, the students made a number of tests in order to verify the usability and capability of the product. In this product testing stage, the students made a video recording in order to facilitate others, especially prospective users, to understand the products better and how to use them. At this stage too, the *ihsan* concept can be observed when they had showed their determination in order to come up with the best output. The students went outside of the university to meet and interview prospective users from the public in order to get their early feedbacks. They had rented cars to enable them to move around easily and had diligently introduced the products to many members of the public. This exercise was quite tiring and imposing, but they had not complained and in fact all of them had confessed of their feeling of satisfaction as they were able to meet the expectations of potential users and to be able to personally involve in the process.

> *"Yes, we have a lot of tests and quizzes in those weeks but we tried very hard to manage our timetable. Some of us had to do revision while moving around in the rental car, while on our way to go to meet our potential customers."* (Anne).

> *"We are exhausted! But all the negative feelings gone when the outsiders test our product and like our product very much. The best thing is when people try the product and want to buy it at that time. We have to tell them – this is not for sale [laughs]."* (Adam).

Finally, the students had to prepare themselves to participate in Innovation Show event. They prepared the presentation notes and with the guidance of the lecturer, including posters in order to help them to impart their ideas to the audience. They had also made the preparations and strategized for the Q&A sessions with the judges. They began to practice for the presentation a week before the event; and a day before event, they ensured that the hall and their respective booths were presentable and attractive to the audience.

> *"We make group practice and asked friends to look the way we presenting our product. Our friends freely give comments and feedbacks."* (Lynn).

On March 10, the students had successfully self-organized Innovation Show 2017 with the theme "Great Intelligence, Create Innovation". A number of groups had been selected as the winners in the event. Three groups were selected to present their product in an international innovation product exhibition that was to be held in May 2017. The participation in the international event was intended to provide the students with more experience as they could observe other students' creation from all over the world. The students could also create more networks with other students from other institutions as well as to get more feedbacks for the product that they have developed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Figure 1 showed that the *ihsan* concept was present during each of the developmental stages and began right from the initial idea phase. Our study had showed the evidence that the students had strived to do their best (*ihsan*) in developing a product innovation. As a result, they had succeeded in developing the products as well as had ensured that the products had potential benefits to the end-users. This determination could also be explained by the prosocial theory. Prosocial can be defined as good things done by some people to benefit others, including the society, the environment or the industry (Sarkam, 2015). Besides promoting the Muslims to do good deeds for others, Islam also encourages its followers to complement the deeds with *ihsan* so that the best outcome can be reaped from the best deed that is performed.

This article highlighted that creative lessons could directly produce critical thinking, as reflected by the ideas presented in Table 1, in which each product had addressed the content, specific standards and the required functional products as final output. As such, we found that the Innovation Show event in this study is indeed a useful platform for the students to showcase and present their creative ideas which had translated to workable product innovations. In addition, the students were less concerned with the grades that they earned from the course, but instead, found satisfaction in being able to do their best during the entire stage of developing their innovations. This outdoor learning had indeed sparked the students' creativity and innovations skills. Such new ways in teaching and learning process are a part of the paradigm shift that are necessary to be embedded in today's tertiary education, in order to prepare the graduates to become more prepared for the real competitive markets in the future.

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