

Call for the Use of Public Transport Among Students and Staff of Private Tertiary Education Providers in the Klang Valley

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Abstract

The Government through the Ministry of Higher Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Transport, will do well to carry out a nationwide campaign as its national agenda to promote the use of public transport amongst tertiary students, who will be the next generation of middle-income wage earners entering the workforce. UCSI, in the taking the lead, is calling on the Government to actively promote the use of public transport by reducing fares for tertiary students and providing tax incentives to education providers, which provides some form of shuttle service similar to the UCSI Shuttle Service, and to commuters who switch from driving to using public transport. This is in line with the recent hike in fuel prices and the call to promote the use of public transport. UCSI also moots the idea of 'Public Transport Day' nationwide to create awareness of the importance of using public transport services as a means to reduce traffic jams and pollution of the environment.

Keywords: public transport, shuttle, students.

1. PUBLIC TRANSPORT – AN OVERVIEW

There are currently some 100,000 tertiary students spread over some 100 major private colleges and universities in the Klang Valley, many of which are located within 10 kilometres from the nearest KTM Komuter, ERL, PUTRA or STAR LRT station. Together with tertiary students from 17 other public universities, the number can go up to 0.5 million. This, against a total of nearly 10 million employees¹ in the country, is a significant market sector, which public transport providers cannot ignore.

Unlike developed countries, the use of public transport amongst students in Malaysia has never been fully exploited by the transport service providers. Public transport is not a popular choice especially amongst tertiary students in private institutions, largely due to the poor services and connectivity between the various modes of public transport. As a result, most private colleges have parking woes and they are beginning to discourage students from driving to college by introducing higher parking fees.

Parents and students, on the other hand, find it hard not to afford a car. Others would have to resort to other means of transport such as carpooling with their friends or taking the taxi to college from the nearest train station. Bus services are generally seen as unreliable, as time taken to reach the destination is often more than an hour, without taking into consideration the number of transits from one end of the Klang Valley to the other end.

In most developed countries, the train system is the backbone to the network of public transport connecting one suburb to another and the connectivity between the stations and the rest of the suburbs are either provided by frequent feeder buses, as in the case of Singapore, trams in the City of Melbourne or other forms of feeder services such as the auto rickshaws in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the *jeepneys* in Philippines, mini buses in Hong Kong and the infamous three-wheeled taxis or *tuk-tuks* in Bangkok. The taxis, while providing a vital service but mainly on a “non-shared” basis, is often considered as the more expensive form of public transport that provides a convenient service right to the doorstep.

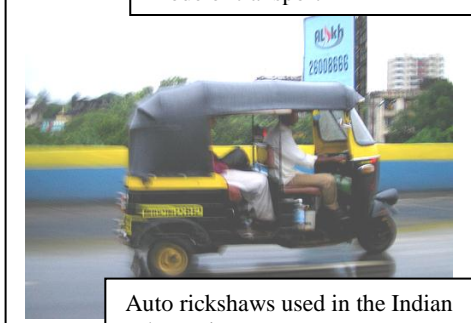
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Trams in Melbourne are important intra-city mode of transport



Bush Taxi used in developing countries



Auto rickshaws used in the Indian sub-continent



Water taxi at Mines Shopping Centre

Source:
www.wikipedia.org

The UCSI Shuttle Service, similar to that of Bush Taxis in most developing nations, provides the connectivity between UCSI and a very strategic interchange at Bandar Tasik Selatan, servicing all three lines (KTM Komuter/ ERL/ STAR LRT). From almost anywhere in the Klang Valley, staff and students can now travel to UCSI.

KTM Komuter and Mines Shopping Centre have also started a very innovative shuttle service using the concept of the Mines Cruise, a form of Water Taxi, to connect between Serdang KTM Station and Mines Shopping Centre. At the price of RM1, shoppers can take the Mines Cruise into the shopping mall from the Serdang KTM Station. The Cruise is an added form of attraction, which provides convenience to the shoppers.

Judging from statistics of passengers turnover for KTM Komuter from 1995, the year when the transport service was launched to 2004², where the increase was nearly 10-fold over a spread of 10 years from a mere 2.8 million to 27.4 million

passengers, it is clear that the future of public transport in this country is bright provided that the right strategies are in place to woo more commuters. The revenue from KTM Komuter Services in its first year of operation was a mere RM5.0 million, but the figure reached RM66 million in 2004, a significant growth of 1300 per cent over a period of 10 years. The New Straits Times³ reported that the commuter services raked a total of RM74.03 million in revenue in 2004. Its 2005 financial results are still unavailable at the time of writing.

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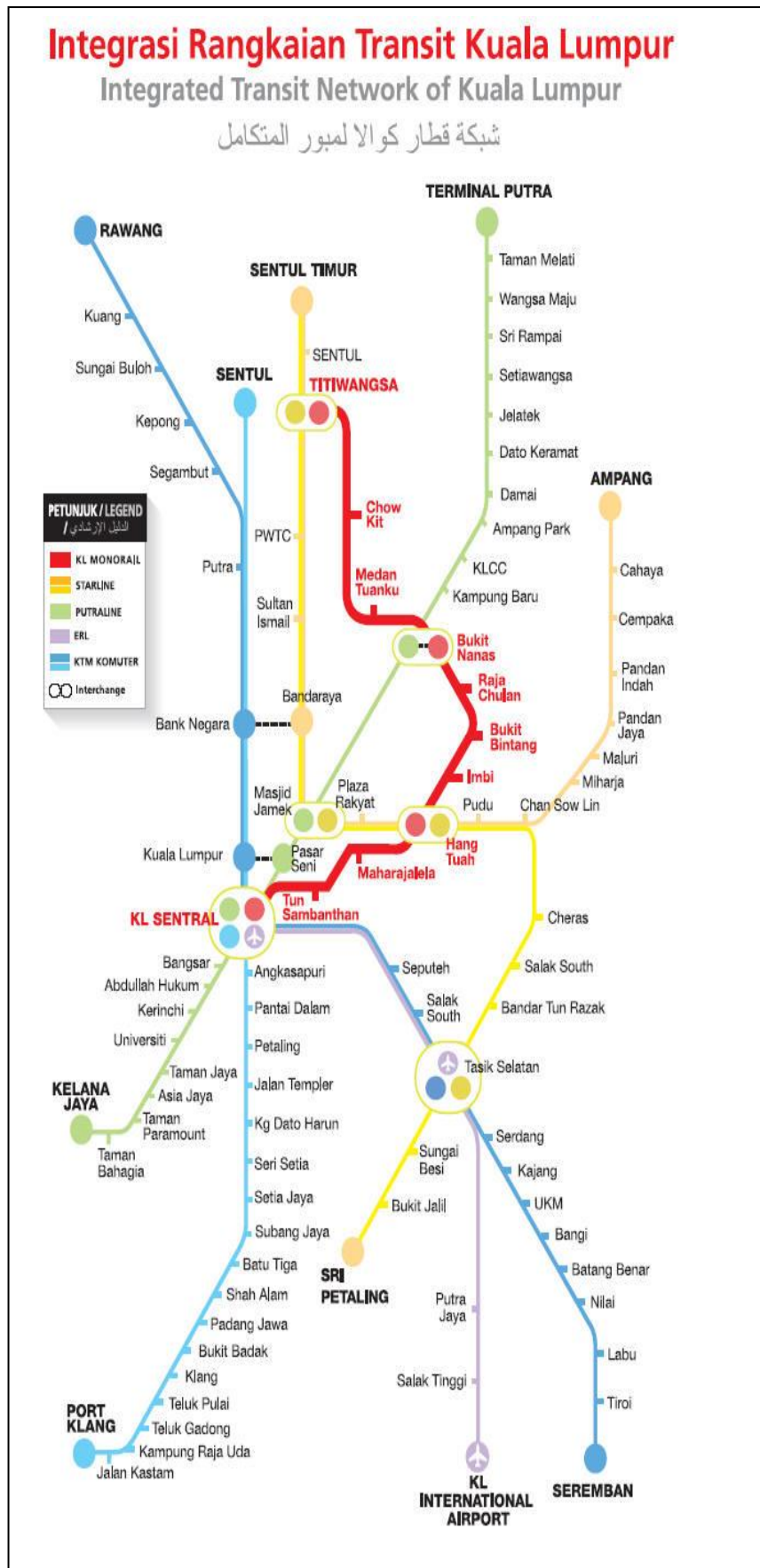
<http://www.mot.gov.my/BM/stat/rel/JADUAL%202-1.pdf>

³ Sharen Kaur: "KTM: On Track to Recovery", NST, 23 May 2006

The existing network of metro rail services involving the KLIA Putrajaya Express (ERL), KTM Komuter, PUTRA LRT, STAR LRT and KL Monorail is already a well-integrated network, servicing some 5 million people in the Klang Valley to as far as Seremban in the South to Rawang in the North and Port Klang on the West coast. With some improvements made to the existing rail routes and the interchanges, such as building overhead bridges and walkways connecting the stations at interchanges and providing better shelters at existing KTM stations, Kuala Lumpur already has one of the best infrastructure in the region that is ready to be exploited to the fullest. The frequency of the trains, especially during peak hours, has to be increased to ensure that it is capable of taking on more passengers.

Using **University College Sedaya International (UCSI)** as a case study, the author has mooted a National Agenda to promote the use of public transport among tertiary students. UCSI has taken the lead to call on the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Transport to carry out a joint-campaign nationwide to promote and encourage the use of public transport among tertiary students, which currently face transportation problem, with some parents resorting to buying their children a car even before the students start working and afford one on their own.

On 24 March 2006, the UCSI Shuttle Service officially started its operations, with one shuttle van plying between UCSI Campus in Cheras and the Bandar Tasik Selatan Station. Carrying the tagline *“Providing Connectivity Where It Matters Most –From anywhere in the Klang Valley, you can now reach UCSI with our*



shuttle service”, the shuttle service was a community service run on minimal fares of RM1 per trip provided to students and staff with the intention of encouraging the use of public transport and to reduce the parking woes in the campus. The service, which currently runs on a half-hourly basis from 7.30am to 6.15pm on weekdays, and from 7.30am to 1.15pm on Saturdays, has gained popularity amongst students, who found it convenient to get to UCSI from their homes. Without the service provided by UCSI, some of the students would have to carpool in taxis or resort to living in the hostel or somewhere nearer to the campus. Others would have to depend on their parents to send them to the university every day.

The idea, mooted by this author, was the result of one attempt on a Saturday morning to travel to work by KTM Komuter from Kepong station to Bandar Tasik Selatan station. The Komuter service was a half-hourly ride from Kepong to Cheras. During the weekdays, the journey, which would normally take an hour-and-a-half on the road during peak hours, was cut short to just one hour using KTM Komuter, and the benefits of being able to avoid the unpredictable traffic jams along Jalan Kuching and Jalan Cheras was seen as a plus point besides the opportunity to catch up with some sleep or to read a book. The only form of connectivity between Bandar Tasik Selatan and UCSI Campus in Cheras prior to the launch of the UCSI Shuttle Service was that provided by the taxis, while RapidKL’s poor reputation and its irregularity did not help to encourage the use of public transport for most staff and students of UCSI. The shuttle service provided by UCSI, therefore, was the result of a need that arises, and has since become an increasingly popular amongst students and staff, who would otherwise have difficulties even thinking about how to get to the campus every day.

2. SURVEY

A brief survey with private education providers in the Klang Valley shows that the idea of the shuttle service between the nearest train station and their campuses is not yet an idea that has been exploited to the fullest. UTAR in Petaling Jaya is probably the only private university that operates its own buses, charging students 50 sen from the Asia Jaya PUTRA LRT to its campus in Jalan University. The idea of the shuttle bus can probably be traced back to its predecessor, TAR College, which still

operates a half-hourly bus from the nearest PUTRA LRT station in Taman Melati to its campus in Setapak.

Kolej Bandar Utama (KBU), by virtue of its parent company, See Hoy Chan’s ownership of RapidKL buses, also provides a shuttle service using a RapidKL bus plying between Kelana Jaya PUTRA LRT station, KBU and One Utama Shopping Centre for the convenience of its students and shoppers. KBU also operates a free shuttle van during peak hours from Bandar Sri Damansara to its campus for students who live in the vicinity. Passengers can ride on the bus for free. The service partly provides a community service to KBU students who need public transport to get to their college as well as to provide some shopping convenience for One Utama Shopping Centre. Its major competitor, MidValley Megamall is accessible via KTM Komuter since the new KTM station was built just beside the megamall. Both shopping malls have parking problems during the weekends.

Most other colleges including Sunway University College, Taylors’ College and Kolej Damansara Utama, have never even thought about encouraging their students to use public transport despite the call by the Government recently. Most colleges in the Klang Valley have lagged behind in providing the shuttle connectivity between their campuses to the nearest train station. UCSI is one of the first to actively promote its shuttle service and in the process to encourage other private institutions to mobilize its staff and students to capitalize on the use of public transport as a means of getting to their campuses.

Colleges outside the Klang Valley such as Nilai International College, which is located some 15 minutes’ drive from Nilai KTM Komuter station, depends largely on taxis, to provide the connectivity. Taxi services, despite being a most convenient mode of transport, are too expensive to be used on a regular basis. Meanwhile, bus services are said to be irregular and mostly unreliable.

3. ENSURING SUCCESS IN THE PROMOTION OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Convenience. Contrary to the general perception, the public including students and staff of tertiary education providers want to use public transport instead of driving to avoid the traffic jams. Driving is the last resort, if public transport is deemed as “inconvenient”. No amount of persuasion will work if the public transport in Malaysia does not concentrate on this one key point about providing convenience to the commuters.

To ensure its success, the management of institutions of higher learning, with high student population, should immediately consider providing some form of shuttle service to its students. The shuttle service will provide the convenience of ferrying passengers right to the doorstep of the campus.

The conceptualization of UCSI Shuttle Service is based on providing convenience to staff and students of UCSI. As feeder services in most suburbs are still underdeveloped, commuters can either drive and park their vehicles at the station nearest to their home and ride on the LRT or KTM Komuter train to Bandar Tasik Selatan station. From the station, on half-hourly basis, the shuttle bus ferries the passengers right to the doorstep of UCSI Campus. Plans are in the pipeline to provide the shuttle service every 15 minutes during peak hours with the introduction of a second shuttle van.

Cousin to Convenience is the Comfort of traveling which public transport providers have to put as their next priority. A sardine-packed train would discourage most people from switching to using public transport; instead, the cramped situation provides good opportunities for pickpockets to operate during peak hours. One of the reasons why motorization has grown rapidly in countries like Malaysia is due to the fact that an air-conditioned private vehicle is capable of providing a convenient and comfortable means of transportation right to the destination. To persuade and convince these motorists to use public transport as a means to save on fuel costs and avoid traffic jams is an uphill battle, until they value the comfort and convenience that public transport is able to provide.

Frequency. One of the reasons why the mini-buses were successful in the eighties is because of

their frequency vis-à-vis the other public omnibus. There was no issue about punctuality for the simple fact that there were many mini-buses plying the same routes in those years.

Top on the mind of anyone wishing to switch to public transport is the question about frequency. In Singapore, the trains arrive every 3 to 5 minutes, compared to KTM Komuter, which is every 15 minutes during peak hours and every 30 minutes during off peak hours. Commuters will not have to worry about getting to work late. This is an area, which KTM Komuter has to improve to accommodate a larger number of commuters switching to its services. Currently, with a train every 15 minutes during peak hours, it is usually sardine-packed especially when one train is delayed. It is not unusual for commuters to experience disrupted services with the KTM Komuter trains, and whenever this happens during peak hours, the number of passengers would build up to extent that the train carriages would be packed to the brim.

Missing a train by just two minutes could mean a loss of up to 45 minutes of waiting time in some instances, where the passengers have to take connecting trains or shuttle bus. This automatically discourages people from switching to public transport, unless there is an increased frequency of the services.

Reliability. They say, in Australia, the buses will wait for you. If you reach the bus stop, you can hop on the bus and be assured that it will only leave the bus stop according to the schedule printed on the timetable. Fixed departure times are important for the commuters to plan their daily trips. The last thing a commuter wants is to reach the bus station and find that the 7.30am bus has left, at 7.25am.

It is hard for the daily commuters to plan their traveling times if the train services are often delayed. The problem can be solved given that the trains are more frequent than the existing 15 minutes during peak hours.

RapidKL, in the eyes of many commuters interviewed, is unable to deliver a reliable service, with oftentimes, passengers wondering whether the bus is on schedule. A passenger attempting to take the RapidKL bus from the nearest bus stop in Taman Connaught, for example, would always wonder whether the bus has just left or is still caught in a traffic jam somewhere. There is no

communication between the service provider and the commuter, in the same manner the stationmaster communicates its next train arrival time using the LCD screen.

Economical. In every decision, there is always the economic dimension that one has to look into. For the public transport system in Malaysia to work, it must be more affordable and the operators should look at the long-term economies of scale, besides just trying to recover their investments within the shortest period possible.

Currently, the UCSI Shuttle Service charges RM1 for its service between Bandar Tasik Selatan and UCSI Campus in Cheras, compared to taxis, which are charging RM4 each trip and the RapidKL fares being 90 sen, with passengers having to drop off at the other side of the East West Highway in front of UCSI Campus. After alighting the RapidKL bus, these passengers will have to use the overhead bridge and walk quite a distance to get to UCSI. The fares charged are used to cover the operating costs, which includes two full time drivers and the maintenance of the 14-seater shuttle van running the half-hourly trips.

4. CHANGING THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT USERS

Considering that promoting public transport is an ongoing campaign that will take years before it takes effect, we call on the Government to set up a Public Transport Day, which will among other activities, see private and public education providers, in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Transport, promoting the use of public transport.

As a continuous effort by the Government to promote the use of public transport, a special unit known as the Mobile Public Transport team set up by both ministries and supported by public transport service providers, should be tasked to conduct all-year-round roadshows to colleges and universities to encourage students and staff to leverage on the existing public transport system. This will include a mobile exhibition bus, which travels to different colleges and universities, to promote usage of public transport. This team will be funded mainly by the Ministry of Transport, which derives its income to cover part of its operating costs through the sales of monthly passes and cashless cards to the users. The bus will

be designed in the same manner the commuter trains and LRT carriages are built to provide students the feeling of being on a train.

The unit should continue to provide information in the form of flyers about the integrated network of rail routes and the time schedules for trains, which currently is hard to obtain from even the main train stations. All service providers currently provide only the routes covered by their trains, and the onus is on the Ministry of Transport to publish pamphlets showing the integrated network of public transport system.

The Mobile Public Transport team, with the support from public radio stations, has to be modeled after the upbeat and funky Hitz Cruisers or the Mix Roadrunners, with exciting freebies and contests on its promotional circuit to attract and interact with young people who are tuned to the Coffee Bean culture, a term coined by this author to describe young people who have little to spend but can still afford a luxury cup of coffee with peers. Their task is to promote the culture of traveling with style using the commuter trains or LRT. If they succeed in their task, they will be creating a new breed of public transport users for the next 20 years, who, unlike the present commuters, will be mainly white-collared middle management executives, wearing their ties, carrying executive bags and reading a book in the train. This will be the Vision 2020 goal set for the Mobile Public Transport team.

Except for the monthly pass, tertiary students currently do not enjoy any form of discounts for using public transport. In a number of ways, students who are on a five-day class week will not find it attractive to purchase monthly passes. Special discounts for using cashless cards targeted mainly at the student population would encourage more students to think of using public transport. Collaborations between the operators of Touch-N-Go cashless cards and the tertiary institutions should be encouraged to enhance the use of a one-card system for all modes of public transport.

In helping the Government to promote the use of the existing public transport systems, private education providers will welcome any form of tax breaks for vehicles used for providing shuttle service for its staff and students. This could be built into 2007 Budget as an incentive to education providers to encourage the use of public transport.

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