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Developing Competent Leaders in Malaysian Higher Education:

An Interview with the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya, Y. Bhg. Datuk Rafiah Salim

By Shukran Abdul Rahman and Munir Shuib



Y. Bhg. Datuk Rafiah Salim

To compete with the best in the world, and hence be recognised as world class, universities must establish a strong academic reputation. University leaders must therefore ensure that their institutions uphold the academic tradition to "publish or perish" and pursue excellence in teaching, learning and research.

It is primarily for this reason that the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has launched its National Higher Education Strategic Plan and the corresponding National Higher Education Action Plan 2007-2010. The action plan is an initiative

of the Malaysian government in the pursuit of excellence and improving quality in all aspects with the objective to lift Malaysian higher education to new heights.

For the initiative to succeed in bringing the country to the forefront of world academia, especially in the international playing field, the vice-chancellor of each university must lead their institution to play its part in materialising the plans.

In an interview with IPPTN, the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Malaya, Y. Bhg. Datuk Rafiah Salim shares her views

The Philosophy of Higher Education of the 21st Century

Aldila Isahak

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An educational system can never be organised along Utopian lines. It is constrained by the possibilities that exist within the socio-political and economic infrastructure from where it springs from and whose benevolence it feeds and nurtures on. An educational system is viable as long as it retains its legitimacy and contributes to the overall growth and harmony of the socio-political and economic environment. Should the system, for any reason, become dysfunctional, it ceases to retain its legitimacy, becomes inadequate and demands change (Zainul Ariff, 1986: 2).

The above statement reflects the general idea of how education evolves. The realism of the philosophy of education vis-à-vis socio-political-economic context within which it exists gives rise to its objective of providing an opportunity to better understand and cope with life in general. The basic skills and knowledge acquired throughout primary and secondary education should have fully prepared the students to enter the world of higher education at tertiary level. The reason is to be further equipped to deal with the world at large and be part of the work force contributing to political stability and economic development of a country. The objective of this paper is to examine the philosophy of higher education of the 21st century.

The question of what is the philosophy of higher education should lead us to its purpose and the aim which it seeks to fulfil that is, by providing opportunities of further learning. The aim of training students to become professionals, administrators, academicians, consultants and scholars that becomes the cornerstone of excellence give higher education its shape. In other words, higher education aims at producing knowledgeable, marketable and employable graduates. The efforts of ensuring comprehensive excellence is obtained and the involvement of lifelong learning in one's life have given rise to the synthesis of extra-curricular and academic activities to be part of graduation requirement. The integrated personality which the philosophy of higher education seeks to produce, involves not only the integration of soft skills within the academic curricula, but also its systematisation through the 'codification' of learning outcome matrixes. In wanting to not lose out in this new economic-based knowledge production, higher education institutions the world over, look into ways of attracting students and harnessing new talents that are not only knowledgeable in theoretical knowledge but also in practical knowledge, hence be marketable and employable. The reason for this harmonisation is to

meet the demands of the governments and the industries of this globalised age. Hence, higher learning institutions began to steer into a seemingly new direction, charting the way from what was once a knowledge-based philosophy of higher education to an economic-based philosophy of higher education.

Thereon, two assumptions are made. First, the philosophy of higher education of this post-modern age is economic-based and secondly, the philosophy of higher education of the great civilisations of yesteryears was knowledge-based. From these two assumptions, the hypothesis formed is that there is a shift in the worldview of higher education from that of creating a well rounded, knowledgeable, ethical moral person to that of producing a marketable and an employable graduate. It must be noted too that this philosophy of higher education of post-modern age is not limited to only producing materialistic graduates but it has also made an impact upon academicians as well, particularly with regard to their contributions in research areas which are taken to be one of the major criteria for promotions rather than for the purpose of the propagation of knowledge.

The integrated personality which the philosophy of higher education seeks to produce, involves not only the integration of soft skills within the academic curricula, but also its systematisation through the 'codification' of learning outcome matrixes.

In order to address this hypothesis, a survey in the history of the philosophy of higher education was undertaken. Beginning with postmodernism, the survey traces the thoughts of Confucius, Plato, St. Augustine, and al-Farabi, representing great civilisations of yesteryears, namely, Chinese, Greeks, Medieval Europe, and the Muslims. The purpose of this survey is to put into perspective the philosophy of higher education from 5th century BC to the 21st century AD. After having completed the survey, an analysis on the worldviews of these civilisations was carried out in order to test the hypothesis.

The philosophy of higher education of Confucius in the 5th century BC was to train the masses for promotions into the civil services. This was because civil service was monopolised by the aristocrats. Confucius developed the idea of a virtuous and ethical civil servant based on the philosophy of *jen* which carries the meaning of benevolent, loyal, respectful, magnanimous, kind, wise, courageous, diligent, tolerant, filial piety and respects the elderly. For Plato, the philosophy of higher education was to produce a philosopher-king. This was to ensure justice as in 'giving everyone his due' is understood properly, hence a just and knowledgeable ruler would rule this city state. Representing the scholars of the medieval European civilisation, St. Augustine, the 5th century church father, reinforced 'the idea of the two swords' in politics, where the Pope and the King had autonomous power to rule the kingdom based on Christianity. At the same time the role of the king was reduced as a vassal to the Pope. Hence, the philosophy of higher education was to Christianise politics. For al-Farabi, a 10th century Muslim thinker, the philosophy of higher education was to provide the understanding of the unity of *tawhid* and mundane life. For him, only the virtuous and the learned would be able to ensure that the proper administration of the state as well as to ensure the development of the community will take place based on the religion of Islam.

The philosophy of higher education of the twentieth century turns toward globalised mercantilism as capitalism became firmly ingrained in world economy. From trading industrial goods and transfer of technologies, this globalised mercantilism finds new products that are more lucrative, namely, arms trade, currency trading and the latest, higher education. As a result of the material benefits that come together after having obtained higher education degrees, people turn toward tertiary education. The involvement of the people in twentieth-century higher education institutions shifted from an "elite system of higher education, involving only a small minority of the population, to mass systems (Scott, 1995) in which the assumption is becoming that most people will participate and on more than one occasion" (Tight, 2003: 4). More and more people demand access to higher education, and as the demand increases people are inundated with the liberty to pick and choose the best higher education institutions at competitive rate.

Hence, the traditional selection based on curriculum to enhance one's knowledge and to fine tune one's skills is not the only criterion which is used to select their university. Branded, world ranking higher learning institutions are sought after. This has created a race among higher learning institutions to improvise their services in terms of providing the most updated-marketable courses, academicians, research activities and facilities. This race to be a world class university based on education excellence has driven higher education sector to be the new business centre: a business centre where knowledge becomes a commodity traded across the borders.

... there is a shift in the worldview of higher education from that of creating a well rounded, knowledgeable, ethical moral person to that of producing a marketable and an employable graduate.

In conclusion, this newfound trade capitalises in giving of degree certificates, offerings of popular courses, training of academicians, producing employable graduates and churning up of academic writings. For the purpose of societal recognition, students' achievements, as well as administrative, academic and scholarly contributions are condensed to statistics that are quantified as yardsticks for purposes of honours and academic promotions. Post-modern philosophy of higher education therefore, reduces knowledge to the status of goods and services. In other words, higher education qualifications have become commodities that are traded and paraded.

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