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**THE UNIVERSITY:  
REFLECTIONS ON AN IDEA**

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# The University: Reflections on an Idea

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Recent years have seen a series of significant developments in tertiary education in Malaysia. The accelerated growth of private colleges and universities has considerably altered the face of higher education in the country. The restructuring of the public universities facing the perceived threat of global and local competition has highlighted these rapid changes affecting our higher education. This is not necessarily bad. Education at every level over time goes through processes of change; they evolve, and these changes reflect the changing circumstances facing a given society. Adapting the academy to face these circumstances are the acts of prudence rather than folly.

However, the changes in tertiary education over the past decade or so have come at a pace perhaps unheard of in the history of higher education in Malaysia. The increasing bureaucratization of the academy and the attempts at streamlining and standardizing the processes of teaching and learning has ignored the fundamental mission of the university. Perhaps it is time that we take stock of the nature and purpose of the academy.

The university plays a pivotal role in the fluid process of the making and un-making of national culture. That has always its historical *raison-de'tre*. It is a prism through which a society can reflect on the world around them and more importantly, on itself. Our universities are not merely tools for the accumulation and production of knowledge and its dissemination, but perhaps more fundamentally it is the community where the highest and most esteemed values in our society reside. Thus in this sense, the university is more than just mere institution; it is the symbolic paragon of our collective ideals. Historically, the development of the modern university is intimately tied to the emergence of the modern nation-state, where the framing of the nation acts as the culmination of our most cherished ideals.

There has been much controversy lately about the nature and general state of education in our country. These issues range from identifying the appropriate medium of instruction in our schools to the purpose and value of a degree from our universities. Those who think that the use of English would dilute and even threaten the very basis of what they perceive to be the continuing nationalist struggle have poured much ink in expressing their opinions, as those who feel, either due to pragmatic or, in some cases, ideological persuasions that the implementation of the language would prove beneficial for the country in the long run (whatever that may mean). Such concerns also bear themselves out in our universities where measures are being taken as we speak to ensure that the purpose of being our leading educational institutions are kept in tune with what our leaders deem as the economic and political demands of our times.

Today our tertiary institutions continually speak the language of 'quality', 'customer satisfaction', 'accountability', 'transparency', 'excellence' as well as other innumerable terms, which are meant to illustrate their continuing dedication to preserve and safeguard

the quality of higher education in our country (according to some or other corporate philosophy). The question of whether these terms are fully understood, and if so, whether such considerations are relevant for the pursuit of higher education are another matter. We hear from our corporate and political leaders the need for universities to maintain their relevance and usefulness for society as a whole; in other words, to keep up with the demands of the 'real world' so to speak. And in doing so, they diminish (perhaps without realising it) the value of an education in and of itself. Now, we merely see education as another instrument in the pursuit of our own demons.

In the universities, the ideas that our degrees have to correspond to some practical demand are continually brandished. Our savants remind us that our universities are falling behind their counterparts elsewhere (without considering where the blame should lie – if, to begin with the concerns are true) and do not respond to demands of work and whatever else that exists in the 'real world'. As an act of concern our universities have taken active steps to institute policies to overcome this perceived shortcoming. Degrees have to, as they say, be grounded in life (though we are never told exactly what 'life' is).

Concerns over the nature and purpose of education are not recent. In most countries issues surrounding education have long held sway over public opinion. This is especially acute in countries where education relies primarily on public funds. The need to utilise such resources effectively (and limited these resources usually are) acts as constraints for both politicians and educationists. Though these issues are real and plays an important role in determining the type of environment institutions finds themselves in, it is to a large extent irrelevant for the purposes of our current discussion (as we hopefully will demonstrate in the subsequent paragraphs). We only wish to offer some remarks on that most venerable of academic institutions – the university – and to ask again the nature and purpose of that establishment. It is perhaps prudent that we again ask ourselves that most basic of questions, 'what exactly is a university?'

In our society, as in most others, as what is considered best in our educational environment, the university serves a dual purpose as both utility and symbol. It provides the nation with skilled and educated labour as well as acting as her paragon of intellectual and academic achievement. They have afforded us some measure of pride in what we have achieved over the past few decades as an independent nation. But the state of our universities perhaps above all is a prism through which the temper of an age is best reflected. Its evolution mimics that of society as a whole and bespeaks the values of that society at a given point in time.

A university, if it is at all to serve its purpose, must by definition, provide intellectual and instructional leadership. By that we mean a university must be the instrument through which a given society can best reflect upon the various possible paths it can take to fulfil its most cherished and valued goals. The university is, at its best, nothing more and nothing less than a platform for possible worlds, where the conflict of ideas is a virtue and concordance a sin.

The university constantly challenges the capacity of individuals to associate in a spirit of free inquiry, with ample respect for the opinion of others. Its core values correspond to free, humane and rational investigation and behaviour. Its faith, constantly renewed and ever vulnerable, holds that if its values are adequately respected within; their cultivation will be encouraged without. Its purpose is to teach those who wish to learn, to learn from those it teaches, to encourage research and original thought, and through its students and faculty, to disseminate knowledge for the preservation and cultivation of responsible civic and intellectual behaviour. That ambition can, and must never be the hostage of any single ideology or dogma.

A university can often seem diaphanous; an assemblage of faculty, student, cultural, intellectual and sporting pursuits, often in conflict as opposed to being in collusion, sometimes bordering on the edge of anarchy. Such is the bane of colliding minds going through the process of what St. Thomas Aquinas called “to contemplate and bring others the fruit of your contemplation”. And the cultivation of the intellect is a fundament to the *raison-Detre* of the academy. This is not to indicate indiscipline; on the contrary, discipline is the key to any successful intellectual pursuit. But discipline in the confines of the academy should not be guided by a set of homogeneous goals designed by administrators, but rather a set of means and ends best determined by those who profess their own field of enquiry. This is not advocating free unguided study, but guidance dictated by those deemed best to offer it as recognised by peers within their own disciplines; not as dictation by those from without.

As the distinguished educationist Lord Annan reminds us, “It is these places that are the guardians of intellectual life. They cannot teach the qualities that people need in business and politics. Nor can they teach culture and wisdom, any more than theologians teach holiness or philosophers’ goodness, or sociologists a blueprint for the future. They exist to cultivate the intellect. Everything else is secondary.... Universities should hold up for admiration the intellectual life. The most precious gift they have to offer is to live and work among books or in laboratories and to enable the young to see those rare scholars who have put on one side the world of material success, both in and outside the university, in order to study with single-minded devotion some topic because that above all seems important to them. A university is dead if the dons cannot in some way communicate to the students the struggle – and the disappointments as well as the triumphs in that struggle – to produce out of the chaos of human experience some grain of order won by the intellect. That is all the arrangement of the university should be directed”.

This is not to say that universities are merely the bastion of high-handed ideals. It is not. The pursuit of education is essentially a moral act, because it is founded on the belief that the process of being educated is at heart beneficial for those who have gone through it. Much of this is assumptive; but then again so are the most sacrosanct values we uphold. Moral ideals are by nature hopeful, for we may never see them realised but they provide us with a compass for direction.

We often hear the exhortation that universities are ivory towers isolated from the concerns of the 'real world'. Critics hold that the relevance of the degree ignores the demands of the workplace. Students are not taught how to use what they have learnt effectively. Students are blame for lacking the ability to communicate and to 'think' effectively. Such concerns are commonplace, especially during periods where the economic resources of a country are under strain and lack the buoyancy to accommodate increasing demand for employment. Under such circumstances, surely the question of employability becomes secondary to the reality of a shrinking job market. And the tragedy is how quickly such balderdash gain widespread currency among those who by most measures, should know better.

The blame though must be shared equally. Universities themselves have failed to communicate its mission effectively to the public. It has adopted a passive role in its own future and as such, relinquished its position as providers of intellectual leadership. A case in point is the recent attempt by universities to introduce changes in their teaching methodology, with the aim of incorporating elements which would facilitate the convergence of thinking and doing (assuming that there was a difference to begin with). It is hoped that these elements will allow them to cope with the changes from study to work effectively. But is this a real problem? If so is the university the appropriate medium for its rectification?

A major part of the problem is due to a misunderstanding between what we take to be the '*theoretical*' (or 'ideal') and '*practical*' dimensions of knowledge. We make a fundamental mistake when we assume that not only do such distinctions exist, but that they are also *essential*. These distinctions are, at best, illusory. True, much of what goes on in any modern university involves the preparation of individuals for a specific vocation – doctors, lawyers, accountants and the like – and as such includes the cultivation of particular skills and habits, conforming itself to the demands of that or this professional guild. But despite the large numbers of those attending university with the hope of obtaining a professional qualification, such concerns should, and does, remain peripheral to the educational aims of the university as a whole.

William James in an address to a congregation of women graduates towards the end of the nineteenth century taught us that all knowledge may be put to two basic uses: it may serve an immediate and tangible purpose by guiding technical action; and it may serve more permanent less visible ends by guiding thought and conduct at large. One is 'know-how', the other is 'cultivation'. The former tells us 'how' to do something, whilst the latter exhorts us to understand 'why' we should do it. As Oliver Wendell Holmes reminds us; 'it is not just a question of how the law works, but more properly, what the law is'.

Most academics and their students are fully aware of the unitary nature of thinking and doing, theory and practice. It seems obvious that before any act can take place, an idea of one kind or another will guide and inform it. One has to be able to think of doing something before one can do it. Hence, by definition ideas and actions go hand in hand. Similarly, many people outside the academy view what goes on behind these walls lack any utility in the so-called real world. Again such misconceptions need to be addressed.

Firstly, ideas by their nature do not exist in isolation – they are interconnected. Secondly, even ideas that are, on the surface, abstract and remote – the nature of numbers, atoms, rights and so on – generally addresses many of the most fundamental ways in which we think of ourselves and the world around us. To suggest that abstract ideas are, in any way, less useful than ideas that could, as we imagine, be more readily applied to provide solutions for the ‘real world’ is patently absurd. It is a total misunderstanding of what ideas are and what they are not.

The discipline of history is a case in point. It has become conventional to subscribe to the idea that history does not have a practical utility. After all, why should knowledge about the past be important for the purposes of technological and scientific progress? There are several ways of looking at this. First, as a brief rejoinder, it should be pointed out that at its most basic level, we couldn’t help but do, and rely on history for our most mundane everyday tasks. A scientific experiment, for example, is usually a process where we test a previous hypothesis to see whether the process and results can be replicated. Only when a result can consistently be repeated do we accept the validity of that hypothesis. This process of course consumes time, and involves reflecting upon previous experiments. This reflection on what has come to pass is, at its most banal, doing ‘history’.

Perhaps the most forgotten lesson in our universities today is the art of learning. We have lost the capacity to distinguish between knowing and understanding. Part of this is symptomatic of the times where the great deluge of opportunities for acquiring information is so overwhelming and the time to absorb them so short, that our capacity to discriminate effectively is severely diminished. The purpose of a university is not just the transmission of knowledge, but more critically the process involved in that transmission. It is in the cultivation of certain habits of the mind – reasoned and disciplined – that the benefits of a university education are disposed.

The emphasis in our universities on science and technology – on the acquisition of specific skills and technical know-how – must be catered to carefully. As Donald Kennedy, President Emeritus of Stanford reminds us, “(because) of the impending transformation of education by economic and technological changes taking place... the life cycle of nearly everything has shortened – of useful information, of technologies, and of special skills. They suggest the importance of educating young people for flexibility and adaptability. Particular skills will lose their utility fast; the ability to reason, to think, and analyse well will be much more durable. Knowledge about our national culture and its historical antecedents will be an increasingly important asset, as the need to learn about and penetrate new occupational environments grows”.

The increasing calls for greater accountability and transparency in our universities are all well and good. To be sure, the recent spate of letters in one of our national dailies reflected on some of the dissatisfaction that exists in the academy. But as the clamour for change grows increasingly louder, it is imperative that we thread carefully. Sometimes, in our passionate fervour for improvement, we take steps which, on the quiet, compromise some of the most fundamental tenets of the university. True, some of the exercises in place for promotion, tenureship and recognition are open to abuse. And in some cases,

they are. But they also provide room for subjectivity in order to include the critical elements of variety and flexibility which is crucial to any burgeoning university. As Thomas Jefferson (whilst in the process of framing the American constitution) recognised two centuries ago, any political system is open to abuse and what distinguishes one system (in the real sense) from another is the wisdom of those who run them. Any institution lacking the human resource to function effectively will always struggle regardless of the system instituted.

Woodrow Wilson in his capacity as president of Princeton in his address to the Association of American Universities asserted that, “All specialism – and this includes professional training is clearly individualistic in its object... The object... is the private interest of the person seeking that training. This exclusivity is the intellectual and economic danger of our times... an intellectual danger, because the merely trained individual is a tool and not a mind; an economic danger, because society needs minds, not merely tools. What we must remain vigilant about is the ossification of institutions and society through set routines”.

Universities are going through a period of uncertainty at the moment. It is losing sight of its reason for being and this is tragic, for the failure of the university is perhaps the clearest symptom of a society in decay.