

## General Education in Social Sciences: Relevance or Redundance

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### INTRODUCTION

The globalisation of economic development has increased the interdependence of Malaysia with its immediate neighbouring countries in the region and the world at large. For that interdependence to be meaningful to the country Malaysia has to have trained and more importantly, informed manpower to forward a Malaysian case to the rest of the world. In this regard, an important aspect that Malaysia needs to consider is not only for it to invest more in human resource development but also to plan for appropriate manpower training. The public universities in Malaysia, like UKM, have to play their part in helping to realise that manpower need. Essentially, the university should train trainable graduates flexible enough to apply their area of specialisation to the needs of the country and at the same time malleable enough to be in the position to make quick adjustment to the changing market needs of the time brought about by the globalisation of development. Herein perhaps lies the role of general education in shaping the manpower of the day This paper argues that the undergraduate training in social sciences and humanities in the Malaysian public university at present still requires the component of general education.

### SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES, AND GENERAL EDUCATION

In the last two decades Malaysia has transformed itself from a low income country grappling with underdevelopment to bring about socio-economic improvement of its people who are largely involved in producing and exporting agricultural resources for the industrial countries and other self-sufficient food producers, to an export oriented manufacturing country. Direct foreign investment as well as local investment have shaped a new labour market that looks for workers appropriate for the industrial expansion. The changing economic structure of Malaysia therefore, calls for e new group of workers, not only for the factories but also for the overall supporting, managerial, administrative and research, and development personnel. Implicit in the new demand for manpower is the need for repositioning the academia and its programme structure and orientation in order to provide the necessary education and training for the people.

Similar changes have taken place elsewhere such as in British Universities and lately in Australian Universities. In the face of globalisation of development, market forces have rendered traditional university curriculum somewhat less appropriate for the current need of the market which is being dominated by the production of manufactured goods for export. Technical and technological based programmes, such as business management, international trade, information system and law seem to be increasingly preferred by the consumers of education since the market has placed more demand on people with such knowledge and skill.

In the present circumstances should social sciences and humanities programmes

make adjustments to the new market conditions? If there is a need for adjustment then how should social sciences and humanities reposition themselves so that they can become parts of the main, players in the new market? Commentaries in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s on the state of the academia worldwide have summed up the increasing inability of established universities to move with the new market changes. Criticisms in such guises as “the imposter in the temple”, “the university turning Australia into an ignorant country” and “towers of babble” in a column in the *Economist* (25.12.93 - 7.1.94: 70-72) are samples of strong criticism against the doings of university in general, that has somewhat gone out of tune with the nature of global development in recent years.

In responses to such criticisms universities in Britain, Australia and everywhere, have started or are making adjustments, some too drastic as to lead to downsizing of faculties and departments while others have made critical changes to their programmes such that their university programmes are not only embodying features that are well suited to the new market demand but are also becoming more attractive to the consumers. In all those exercises there have been tendencies for the power that be in those universities to marginalise programmes and courses with less market potential. And the decision to do so is often based on consumer choice. Programmes in the social sciences and humanities are not spared. However, contrary to general perception, social sciences and humanities do not fair that badly.

The social sciences and humanities have the resilience to withstand the changes brought about by the new market forces. The globalisation of development and the rising dominance of export manufacturing industries which are in need of support from personnel with technological know-how, technical skills, knowledge of trade, business system and management, and economics, cannot be divorced from the social context within which the globalisation of development proceeds. This social context requires a sustained input of the export industrialisation, so that management teams would have more than just technical and management training and skill. So is the case with international trade. The purely technical aspect of the trade is but only a part of the total scenario of the international trading system. There is need, for example, to know about the way business is being conducted in the countries of the trading partners. And there are issues relating to business ethics, the problems of interpersonal communication and language barriers. All these demonstrate the importance of comparative culture studies, masters of foreign languages, and above all, opening up of the minds and worldviews of the actors in the global development. When one talks about these 'social' skills one is bringing the argument thus far to the consideration of training graduates in the university with general education.

#### THE ROLE OF GENERAL EDUCATION: IS IT REDUNDANT IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES?

The relevance of general education in the contemporary world is best summarised by the following quotation:

As executives ascend the corporate ladder, the problems they face become more general in nature and cover a wide range of disciplines. If executives offer their specialty only, their perspective of the various options and alternative solutions will be narrow.... It is important for executives to understand that the typical daily problems call for a broad

general knowledge, open-mindedness, understanding of human nature, an insight into human frailties, a fairness of mind and a clarity of thought (Smith, Nov. 1988).

It is imperative next to come to grip with the term “general education” in the context of social sciences and humanities. From a reading of handbooks of some American Universities which have longer experiences in incorporating the general education component into undergraduate studies, it seems that general education centres on preparing university students with certain skills that will enable them to be effective in their service to the society. These skills include; a) the ability to interact and communicate with other fellow men. Interaction could be in the form of a composition that is written simply and clearly. And the person should show the ability to articulate the prose in an orderly fashion. He should be able to demonstrate the use of quantitative and symbolic reasoning. b) The ability to demonstrate a broad knowledge of some of the main fields of learning. This entails the student to have a good grasp of a basic field of study along with knowledge in allied fields, even at an introductory level that may contribute in the end to building a civilised worldview in a society such as Malaysia. c) The ability to organise data, analyse them, then evaluate the results and synthesise them, thus training the mind in handling information and extracting their meanings critically. d) To be aware of world culture and civilisation. e) The ability to take advantage of the present information explosion in the world. Since information is important in building up knowledge among the citizen, the university is responsible to build up the skills required to source as well as to use the information lest he or she will be marginalised in the increasingly digitized economy.

As a whole then the university has to prepare its students to be a man of the world. To achieve this end the university has to offer students some basic knowledge in some discipline together with the component of general education. Translating this offer in the social sciences and humanities, the university students surely have to have skills in one or two basic subjects such as in history, literature, sociology and anthropology along with general education.

The question arises then, are not the skills that are supposed to have been acquired from the liberal education mentioned earlier obtainable from the social sciences and humanities themselves? To answer that we need to look briefly into what constitutes social sciences and humanities. Briefly, social sciences study human behaviour in its social and cultural context. Thus a range of disciplinary subjects embrace this aspect of study, such as political science, sociology, anthropology, economy, social psychology and human geography. The humanities concern with human values and are aimed at unravelling the spirit of man. A range of subjects deal with this corpus of knowledge, such as languages, literature, history, archeology, philosophy and the arts. In traditional university training, the humanities is recognised as a fundamental division of knowledge, and therefore it becomes parts of the general education of man. From the array of subjects in this branch of study, the social sciences and humanities can be assumed to have provided the basic knowledge contained in the outline of the general education.

University students offering subjects in the social sciences and the humanities have been exposed to quantitative and symbolic reasoning, the study of culture, the appreciation of beauty in poetry, the meaning of meanings in philosophy, the search of innerself in psychology and many more. The social sciences and humanities therefore, provide training in the development of whole individuals in the context of their social and

cultural milieu, their reasoning faculty, and the appreciation of art.

All these will contribute towards the shaping of an informed (and rational, infused with modernity), world view about life. Further, programmes of study under the social sciences and humanities, under either the faculty or the school system usually provide a broad coverage of an area of study (including under the wing of social sciences and humanities, disciplines beyond what is normally listed as purely social sciences and humanities subjects of study such as physical geography and physical anthropology).

Students are also exposed to the handling of data and their manipulation, providing the basis for some forms of numerical literacy in basic as well as advanced numerical analyses and statistics. One is not totally wrong to perceive that the social sciences and humanities programmes have provided a broad-based education. In this respect, insisting on additional courses from general studies for the students to offer in their degree programme could be redundant.

So why should there be the fuss for general education? The reasons for the fuss for general education should be seen in context. The need for the general education inputs arises from examining carefully the scope of general education, as defined earlier. The education of man to meet not only market demand but also the social and cultural needs of the Malaysian society in the global context in the coming century may require more inputs than what has been outlined thus far. Accepting the characteristics demanded by the society of executives at present, as they have been outlined earlier, and to sustain them through in the next few decades, programmes of studies in the social sciences and humanities today and in time to come have to consider more inputs. Those extra inputs could be in the form of a reform of sort in the field of social sciences and humanities to accommodate the need for a broader field of study and to cultivate the minds further in order to produce the man with a basic specialisation of a kind along with a more flexible combination of general education covering areas not commonly offered such as music and fine arts.

If the faculty structure of Social Sciences and Humanities cannot accommodate that general education need themselves, then a closer networking with other fields of study such as the physical sciences is necessary. Inputs such as Islamic civilisation, for example, has to come from outside the School or Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, if the programmes offered in the faculty are not able to provide it.

#### IS GENERAL EDUCATION RELEVANT TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES?

Whether general education is relevant to social sciences and humanities or not depends on what kind of graduates social sciences and humanities programmes wants to produce. Referring to the quotation of Brian Smith's view earlier, and using it as a context to make a proposition of the place of general education in the social sciences, it can then be suggested that a person can be regarded to have been educated if he/she has the ability to play his/her role effectively in the Malaysian society. In the circumstances, he/she, I feel, must have a specialisation in one of the fields of study in social sciences and humanities.

That specialisation will give him/her the niche in one disciplinary knowledge to build his/her confidence. To help shape the person's intellectual prowess and "roundedness" in his/her educational upbringing, there is need to give him/her a broader knowledge of the major fields of learning than what the social sciences and humanities are presently able to impart.

Apart from that the individual undergraduate should be trained to articulate and present arguments on topics effectively through clear writing and oral presentation. In the articulation process the person is expected to employ his/her ability in quantitative and qualitative skills to extract information from the data in order to have a more analytical perspective before he/she arrives at some form of conclusion, and then to situate the conclusion once again in the broader field of the subject. The ability to relate the conclusion to the wider context will require exposure to broader cultural studies embracing the history of ideas, history of civilisation and philosophy. What is argued here is perhaps the training of the minds in addition to providing the means to acquire a broad-based knowledge that is useful in the day to day living of the students.

In the end we hope that graduates are able to adapt easily to demands of a new situation, to offer original views and ideas. They are articulate in their argumentation, critical but with the capacity to listen to criticism, proactive in attitude, and have the capacity to try new ways of doing things. We may add many more of these qualities that we think the graduate should have. And we may be adding more amorphous qualities that may in the end be incrementally developed even without their having to come to the university. But together with the basic specialisation at the undergraduate level we feel the graduates will have more exposure than if they were to go without the broad knowledge input. In sum what we would like to aim for is then to offer to the society a new generation of graduates who are creative, open, critical in their reasoning, proactive, having self-confidence and able to communicate clearly and effectively. They know their responsibility to themselves, to their families, to the nation and to fellow humanity.

Are not all that have been said the objectives of the Faculty or Schools of Social Sciences and Humanities at present? It is true that all that the skills listed are within the purview of the Faculties and Schools. The education of social sciences and humanities in the country and elsewhere has been to achieve all the skills mentioned earlier. Students are exposed to subjects of studies that cover all those skills. However, we would like to propose that the broad base knowledge of major fields of studies is still not broad enough to encompass the achievement of some of the skills required in the education of man for the next millennium. The students have to get exposure to some major fields in the physical sciences too, the knowledge of which is useful in the day to day living. Further, there has been a tendency that specialisation in particular fields of studies in the past, has turned programmes in the social sciences and humanities into over specialized modules that are too narrow in focus. At this juncture it is useful to draw from the experiences of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM in the early years of its establishment.

Undergraduate students offering the social sciences and humanities programme in the 1970s had to take courses from three Departments in the Faculty in the first year, and subsequently they had to carry courses in two Departments in year 2 and year 3. Then they specialised in one Department in the fourth year. In addition the students had to

complete a number of compulsory university courses including English. The university courses were meant to provide the basic elements of general education to the students. One interesting feature of the programmes at the time was the requirement that the students had to take one course in general science and one in mathematics from the Faculty of Science. That requirement had broadened the knowledge base of the arts students. Students and faculty members responded well to the programme, acknowledging the utility of the broad-based component of general education. But the pursuit of specific skills and specialisation has gradually undone the attractive part of that programme in subsequent decades.

From the foregoing arguments the elements of general education are indeed relevant in the social sciences and humanities. Its relevance however is more towards providing a broader knowledge base to include the physical sciences and technology, to provide a more systematic intellectual training incorporating communicative adaptability, and trainable quality, proactive, creative with self-confidence and resilience. In short there would be training in character building as well.

## CONCLUSION

In the context of change brought by globalisation of development in Malaysia and the world, there is a need to have general education even in the field of social sciences and humanities. The provision of such education and training will prepare students to have some form of specialised knowledge and at the same time the students will have a broader exposure to knowledge as well as intellectual training. All will contribute towards the education of man in the coming millennium.

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