

Ucapan/Speeches

Malaysian Studies, Higher Education and National Development

**DATO' DR. HAJI SHAFIE HJ MOHD SALLEH
MINISTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Human societies cannot be studied like plants, animals, or rocks that can be controlled in the laboratory. Human societies are first of all human – they interact with the researcher, are dynamic, complex, and changing. The whole society is the laboratory. Studying them using the lenses and methods of the natural scientists will not do justice to the society's complexities. Yet, we want truth and hard facts to help us understand and make sense of the complex reality. For us in the Government in particular, we want to know the truth and the facts of the case so that our policies are well-informed and meet the target group and benefit the people and nation.

What I am emphasising here is the responsibility of scholars not only to their peers in the academic community, but equally important, to the society or community that they study, namely the people and the generations that may be affected by the results and implications of their study. It goes without saying that to be truthful to one's vocation, we must uphold academic rigour, especially with regard to the theoretical and conceptual framework and methods. We need to marshall all the relevant facts, make good analysis of the myriad of facts, be as objective as possible, avoid prejudices and biases, grasp the part and the whole, and make recommendations and suggestions based on these facts.

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN UNIVERSITIES

This last point brings me to social science education in the universities. Much criticism has been leveled at the social science education particularly with regard to the employability of social science graduates. I have been quoted quite extensively in the media as espousing the double major programme as one of the solution. First, we would like the students to have a broader base of disciplines so as to enhance their marketability, and second, let them be well-equipped

with the necessary theories and methods of analysis in understanding and interpreting society that I talked about earlier, and be good problem-analysts and problem-solvers. And, I must emphasise, it is our responsibility to impart these necessary theoretical, analytical, methodological and social skills to them, so that they can master and use the arsenal of knowledge in real life and in their career. I believe this constitutes a serious challenge to the social sciences in general, and to Malaysian Studies in particular which I hope you all will seriously deliberate as part of MSC4.

There is a misperception among the public that the Government has been sidelining the social sciences with our policy of achieving a 60:40 ratio in terms of science to non-science students intake in our universities and also in terms of budget allocation. The reason for this 60:40 policy is quite simple. Policies do not evolve in a vacuum, but out of historical necessity, springing from an analysis of current and projected future needs. In the past, we have been short of expertise in the fields of science, technology, medicine and allied subjects, as our previous focus was on training social science administrators, managers, teachers and extension-officers as part of nation-building. That phase of nation-building has now gradually shifted to a different stage, i.e., one which requires a greater number of scientific, technical, and technological personnel, to facilitate our R&D, in our quest to build a high-tech knowledge economy and society. In order to 'leapfrog' the stages of development, the Government needs more of such people very fast; and we do not have the luxury of time on our side to wait many years to have such expertise.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

But, the Government is fully aware of the importance of the 'soft' components of development, that is, the development of the human ware, not just the hardware. The more we develop materially, the more, we have to pay attention to human development so that our development is holistic, balanced and all round. Hence, the 40% social science student ratio is being maintained. The Government has also recently formulated and announced the NATIONAL INTEGRITY PLAN to enhance ethics and integrity not only in the government sector, but also in the private sector, political parties, and the society at large. I am glad to hear that the Plan was formulated by engaging social science expertise from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the Malaysian Social Science Association. Several other policies have also been formulated or are in the process of formulation to address the soft component of development, and a number of academics have been engaged to facilitate these. All these show at least two things: first, the important synergy between Government policy-making and the academic community — of how academic scholarship namely the social sciences, feeds into policy-making, and of how policy-formulation benefits from

academic scholarship. And second, it also powerfully demonstrates that social science expertise is urgently needed to study and make recommendations concerning various dimensions of the soft component of national development. All round holistic development based on ethics and integrity is one of the main agendas of the new administration to ensure that our development is balanced and has the broader goals of the people's well-being at heart. In this regard, the Government will continue to allocate grants for social science research into the various dimensions of nation-building and society-formation, including the impact of globalisation on the various dimensions of the society and the economy, and we hope that the social science community will come forward with their proposals to conduct good solid research.