

Liberal arts and the humanities

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Datuk Halimah Mohd Said

**Presiden, Persatuan Suara Keamanan, Hati Nurani dan Kebolehan
Menaakul (PCORE)**

TO be an alumnus of the oldest university in Malaysia is a great honour. To have graduated from the University of Malaya (UM) during its heyday in the 50s and 60s is an academic privilege. To join the ranks of UM alumni in contributing to the nation's early development is an accomplishment indeed.

In November 2019, the Faculty of Arts and Social Science (FASS) UM celebrates its 60th anniversary with a gathering of graduates at the Homecoming event in the arts concourse and at the Royal Gala Dinner. The events are momentous occasions that will flash back to the faculty's achievements and inspire its future growth.

The original Faculty of Arts established in 1959 changed its name to Faculty of Arts and Social Science to include a wider modern curriculum. From its inception the faculty attracted the most number of students because of the vast range of courses available in the humanities, and the marketability of the Bachelor of Arts degree acquired after three or four years of study.

One has only to look at UM's alumni roll to see the huge number of graduates who have partaken of the academic offerings of the faculty over the last sixty years, and who have played key roles in Malaysia's post-independence growth through their various careers. These include many of Malaysia's most distinguished civil servants, diplomats, lawyers, academicians, lecturers and teachers.

These outstanding men and women are products of an era when the humanities were considered key to the educational development of an individual, and where the breadth and scope of knowledge were contained in subjects like language, literature, history, law, sociology and anthropology. What they acquired from their alma mater was the exposure to knowledge and a world view expounded by the best academic minds. The medium of instruction then was English which opened their minds to the best scholarly works in the world.

Today the faculty continues to offer traditional and newly-defined undergraduate courses in Anthropology and Sociology, Chinese Studies, East Asian Studies, English Literature, Environmental Studies, Geography, Gender Studies, History, Indian Studies, International and Strategic Studies, Media Studies, Social Administration and Justice, and South East Asian Studies.

Graduate programmes include full-research MA and PhD, mixed-mode Master programmes in English Literature, Malaysian History, South East Asian History, South East Asian Studies, International and Strategic Studies, and a full-course programme in Media Studies.

Sixty years ago, education in science and technology was still in its infant stages and was represented mainly in the faculties of medicine, dentistry, engineering and science. Students in these faculties were looked up to in awe for having achieved good Higher School Certificate (HSC) results in the natural sciences such as Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and in the much dreaded Additional Maths. As doctors and engineers, their future was assured as their professions were very much in demand at the forefront of the nation's development plans.

Today there is rising popularity of science and technology-related subjects, in particular information technology. The prolific expansion of the internet and social media has made these subjects among the most viable in terms of employment

opportunities and career development. An IT qualification is considered a boon to your placement in the job market and to your business prospects.

Although science and technology have remained keys to modern civilization as they were in the days of old, there is growing belief that the humanities open doors to man's more enduring inner stability. Subjects dealing with philosophy, law, history, ancient and modern languages, culture and religion as well as the visual and performing arts open students' minds to what constitutes human society in order for them to understand better social phenomena, human behaviour and interaction.

Not everyone's brain is partial to the precision in scientific and mathematical logic and to the vast possibilities of technical and technological innovation to make human life more efficient. Many of us are better at a different form of thinking, creativity and flexibility which education in the humanities offer.

Arts and the social sciences offer numerous study options and combinations of disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, thereby expanding job opportunities. Besides, graduates gain a good liberal arts education which exposes them to current global issues such as poverty and its attendant problems, human rights and gender studies as well as media, culture and communication. Environmental studies, politics and public policy, sociology and psychology add to the life-long potential of expanding one's mind to the things that matter in the day to day life of a society, its communities and the people who constitute them.

Without sounding too biased, it would fair to conclude that people with a liberal arts education make more interesting communicators because of the breadth of knowledge they have acquired through their multidisciplinary reading and references. They assess and evaluate things more critically and broadly, going beyond the borders of a strictly scientific and mathematical logic. The logic of linguistics and pragmatics coupled

with the encyclopedic knowledge of their various disciplines allow for a much broader cognitive basis in reasoning.

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