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MALAYSIA'S
**HIGHER
EDUCATION:**
IN NEED OF
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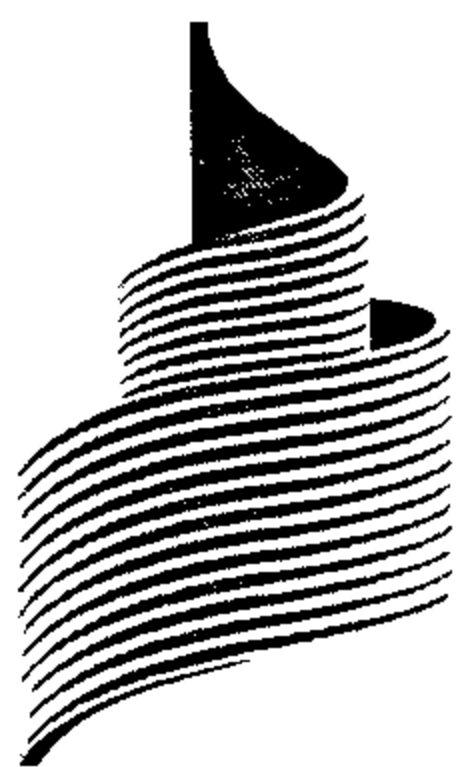
Keynote Address by
Tan Sri Dato' Seri Utama Arshad A
Pro-Chancellor, UiTM



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‘Malaysia’s Higher Education: In Need of Radical Transformation?’

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PROLOGUE

PERDANA DISCOURSE SERIES 16: MALAYSIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION: IN NEED OF RADICAL TRANSFORMATION?

Introduction

The history of higher education in Malaysia is considered relatively short compared to that of neighbouring countries such as Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia. However, throughout the period starting from the establishment of the University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur campus in 1949 until now, which is less than 70 years, several changes and reforms have taken place in various aspects of higher education. It is important that the growth, challenges and achievements are well understood in order to decide whether changes are needed to move to greater heights in the future.

Growth in Higher Education in Malaysia

The history of higher education in Malaysia can be broadly divided into four main phases. Before 1970, access to higher education was limited to a select few. During the 20-year period of the second phase, between 1970 and 1990, access for higher education improved tremendously with the establishment of six public institutions of higher learning (IHLs) – UKM, UTM, UPM, UUM, UIAM and USM. In addition, there were polytechnics, community colleges and private institutions that offered a wide range of courses at the certificate and diploma levels. The third phase is defined as the period after 1990 to 2000, when eight more public institutions were set up with several private colleges awarded the university status.

The period after the year 2000 up to the present is a period of a number of dramatic changes in the character and functions of higher education in Malaysia, in tandem with changes taking place around the region. These changes are partly in response to globalisation and the development of knowledge-based economy worldwide. As a result, the Private Higher Educational Act 1996 higher education in Malaysia was amended in 2003 which subsequently lead to restructuring of private IHLs in order to make it more competitive globally.

Specifically, the amended act provides for the establishment and upgrading of private universities, university colleges and branch campuses of foreign universities in Malaysia which led to a steady increase in the number of foreign students enrolled. This period is also associated with the liberalisation of education in Malaysia.

Recognising the importance of higher education and its contribution to the economy, Malaysia identified it as one of the services sub-sectors for further growth and development in the Industrial Master Plan 3 (IMP3) for the period 2006-2020. This achievement is not free of challenges that need to be addressed by the relevant ministry and agencies under it.

Challenges in Higher Education

As of this year, there are 20 public universities, seven foreign universities campuses and close to 500 private institutions of various categories – most of which are small colleges. However, with over 500 institutions now established, it is of great concern that none of them made it in the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings 2012/2013 and The Times Higher Education World University Ranking 2012/2013. In contrast, two out of six universities in Singapore consistently made it in these world rankings.

The top world universities are especially excellent in research. In Malaysia, public universities are dependent heavily on government funding for their operations, research and development. Unlike established world-class universities, other sources of funds are limited and thus to a certain extent hamper their efforts for world-class research activities. On the other hand, many private universities, especially those with small enrolment are facing financial difficulties as they rely on students' fees to survive. Hence, research and development is definitely not their priorities.

In 2012, over 90,000 international students from all over the world are studying in Malaysia making it the world's 11th largest exporter of educational services. This number is expected to grow to 200,000 in 2020. Based on these figures, there is no doubt that Malaysia is an attractive destination for overseas students as a safe and relatively cheap place to study.

However, managing such a large number of foreign students is not a simple task as they come with different values and practices which may be unfamiliar to Malaysians. There have been cases of student visa abuses, conflicts among students of different nationalities and other crimes involving these students.

Also, a large concentration of certain nationalities in one area often causes anxiety among the locals. On the other hand, there have been crimes against them as well such as cheating by private colleges/agents and prejudices against some nationalities by the local communities.

Unemployment needs to be looked at seriously as several studies have reported that unemployment among fresh graduates has been increasing over the last ten years. Among the reasons cited for their inability to secure jobs are: lack of communication skills, poor attitudes, lack of confidence and low-demand qualifications. If these graduates are not ready for the job market, who is to be blamed? For example, should communication problems be addressed at the primary and secondary levels? Similarly, should universities focus on just job-related skills or train students on attitude and other soft skills as well?

Questions to think about:

1. What are the main challenges faced by higher education providers – public and private?
2. Are public universities ready to be independent from the government in terms of funding and monitoring?
3. What is the extent of autonomy that should be accorded by public universities in terms of staff appointment, academic matters and financial decisions?
4. What drastic transformations are needed to transform our universities into world top-ranked universities?
5. How do we ensure that our graduates are ready for the job market?
6. Is private higher education adequately monitored?
7. What steps need to be taken to ensure foreign students recruitment is not abused?



Tan Sri Dato' Seri Utama Arshad Ayub Pro-Chancellor, UiTM

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. Assalamualaikum warahmatullahiwabarakatuh. Selamat pagi and good morning to all.

I think I have had the privilege of being associated with higher education for about 45 years. Over the decades I've revised many of my ideas about what needs to be achieved and how. At the same time I have always had in mind that what anybody had done in the past is of historical value which may be a good example for the future. But don't rely too much on the past. If you rely too much on the past, I don't think you'll get very far ahead. As an example, everybody has a car; if you look at the (rear view) mirror, look for just a short while, don't take too long because you'll meet with an accident. At the same time, I must note that some fundamental principles remain constant.

One of them is the way the nation has so successfully used education as a tool of national and individual development and social engineering. That we cannot run away from. Our nation has improved the living conditions of our masses by the expansion of education, primary, secondary or higher education. And education has contributed to upward mobility in the social and economic arena. This is particularly in the case of Bumiputra development, the function of which ITM or UiTM is doing these days.

And for your information, at the moment there are 500,00 graduates who come from Dewan Latihan RIDA, MARA College of Business Professional Studies, Maktab MARA, Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM) and University Technology MARA (UiTM). There is a big number of them and this is through the development of the Institute. And I think this is very important; and not only that, today, we have 21 Government-Linked-Universities.

But there are also the private universities. I think if I'm not mistaken, if you look at the news, there are around fifty (50) universities and university colleges. And if you look at the difference between the two, especially in the case of the private university, without being racist, 90 to 95 percent, as an average, are non-Bumiputra. How do you develop these students in the future? To me, in the case of private universities, how radical are they going to be to allow the opportunity or even financing, to increase the population of the Bumiputra in the universities?

Education has cemented our economic growth, improved the general standard of health, expanded housing and employment opportunities. Since Merdeka (1957), many new industries and social services have developed. More equitable societies have been forged with a better opportunity for individuals in the countryside as well as the town.

In general I think there is nothing seriously wrong with our higher education policy and system. We need adjustments and a better balancing in conflicting interests rather than radical changes on the following issues: What should tertiary education be for? What should be its aim and objectives? What should our curriculum contain? Who and what should constitute the clientele of our universities? What methodologies should be adopted? How should the university leaders and staff be chosen? And how far should the federal government try to manage or control universities? Should universities evolve their own rating criteria? Actually the papers often say which university is in the top 100, whether it is Times or the Jiao Tong in Shanghai (World University) Ranking; we have our own SETARA, so it doesn't matter. But these issues are what universities are facing.

University administration and leaders cannot ignore this. Whether it is the public or private universities, they must take part in this. Because whether you like it or not, sometimes students for some reason or another, will choose the higher grade or the so-called better university. The other thing is that we have also foreign universities in the country, for example: University of Nottingham, University of Melbourne and a lot of other universities have Australian lecturers, or British lecturers or Canadian lecturers.

So there are many other universities that will give more opportunities for higher education.

What should tertiary education aim to be? A university is a temple of learning and it must foster love of knowledge. I think that is very important. Invite activity of thought or receptivity to beauty (and) human feelings. We must promote an adventure of ideas and regard this adventure as exhilarating. I mean you just cannot go to the university, you go through the university; there's so much to be done in the university between three to five years. It is a storehouse of knowledge and it is a place where new knowledge can be generated. Otherwise if you don't generate new knowledge, it'll be just like a school.

And another thing that is important to me is career training and character building. A university's role is to build the character as well as careers of all those who go through it. Universities must inculcate in their students social culture and social perspectives. For all members of the university, the university must be a laboratory for testing out a new vision of the future. Yes, you have rights, freedom, you do have freedom, but don't forget this important thing, your responsibility and duty to yourself, family, the university, state, and those who helped you in the process. And this is where I think a lot of the younger generation fail; you talk about democratic rights, freedom, but don't forget we have our duties and responsibilities. And that is not necessarily radical in nature, but just to keep reminding you of the importance of responsibilities and duties.

Research for national development

Now, the other crucial core factor in eminent universities is qualified academicians with proven research ability. And a good part of the research should be applied research to address and suggest solutions to the burning issues of the time, whether they are impending environmental catastrophes, poverty, injustice or marginalisation. This is very important. Now what I've done is this. I've gone through the education (system) in the colonial days, the Japanese occupation then back to colonial days and when we gained Independence back in 1957 until now. So these are the years that I've gone through that have reflected how I behave, what I want to do and what I like during those days living in the rural areas and how we talked about UiTM's 'Destini Anak Bangsa'

Before I forget, the stress is not so much on your entry qualification, but what you are and what happens in the end. These are what we must bear in mind. So therefore, universities must take this into account and not



necessarily take in the 10As, 9As, 4As, straight As and so forth, nor the people who come from the clever genes and you don't take all from "PERMATA" and so on. No, there are other people, you know. And I think that any radical change must take into account those who I call 'average', who, for one reason or another, do not have the opportunity to raise their standard of basic education to enter university. And I think each and every university must take this into account. But I'm very glad that UiTM has started it and I think Dato' Prof. Ir. Dr. Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar has started 'Destini Anak Bangsa'. Now, (this programme) has about five thousand (5,000) students. They were given a chance, in my time - those who had minimum qualification, we supplemented them with adequate credits and between six months to one year of English Language (lessons) and so on. And these are the things probably the university should take into account.

What should the curriculum contain? The curriculum must show awareness and need of the profession in the industries. I think that is important. Universities should strengthen their links with the professions, devise curricular that satisfies not only qualifying boards, but also the professions. We need to strengthen the requirements for students to do practical training. I remember ITM in 1965-1975, people spent about 3 to 6 months in a business organisation like NESTLE and Sime Darby and so on. This is very important for the faculty. Sometimes faculties ignores this, faculty professors must build their relationship with organisations, businesses, firms, plantation industries, especially now with the discovery of new knowledge, it is important for us to do that. And I think you cannot simply tell the company "Here are my students who will undergo practical training" but you don't visit them. In fact we have to be above the rest. I think Professors and faculty members must really go and work in the industry from 6 months to 1 year to say the least, so you can understand better when you educate the students at the university.

I have a suspicion that despite formal curriculum and revision committees, curriculum design is based on outdated, unfair assumptions, and empirical research is not done to discover the actual need and demands of the market place.

Fostering a culture of research

That is one of the functions of the university. The crucial core factor in the university's M&A is qualified academicians with proven research abilities and the solid commitment to lead and participate in (an exchange) of ideas to meet the necessities of the times.

A university cannot become an acclaimed university unless it possesses a large number of scholars who are the voice of the profession not only to contribute to knowledge application by reflecting the light produced by others, but are generators of new knowledge and the source of new emanation to the world. To this end, all universities now give institutional and financial support for research. They must train undergraduate students in research methodology.

However, the emphasis on research must not be at the expense of teaching. The new found emphasis on research is leading to teaching being neglected. Some senior academicians are doing insufficient or no teaching. They are either holding administrative posts or are busy preparing bulky research portfolios. Some senior educators teach beginning and preparatory courses which are another issue. In my time in ITM, the senior-most lecturers were the ones required to teach and mould the younger minds. On principles of justice, the best facilities should be reserved for the weakest and if you moderate these principles, I believe that the best senior-most lecturers must spend a few hours with the youngest and rawest students; this will aid the transformation of the mind. Just because you are a full professor, it doesn't mean you should not teach the first year students or the 'freshies'.

Committed teachers are being bypassed in tenure and promotion in comparison with entrepreneurial researchers. Instead of singling out and supporting good researchers, wherever they are found, the Malaysian approach is to announce some universities as APEX or Research Universities and shower them with special grants; innovators in non-research universities are therefore prejudiced. I believe that teaching and research must go hand in hand. The lecturer who does not read, write or research is not much of a lecturer. Conversely, a researcher who only researches but does not teach must be transferred to specialised institutes where he or she can do research full time. I believe that the vision of research and comprehensive universities must be re-examined.

We should support good researchers wherever they're found and single out high performing centres and units no matter where they are found, and not give entire universities higher research allocations to do research. Alternatively, universities can set up companies or subsidiaries to perform this highly specialised but narrow function.

In our research-centric atmosphere, the danger is the unethical practice of arranging and supporting findings favourable to the sponsor; receipt of

sponsorships and grants from the industries need to satisfy academic integrity. Another problem is form over substance. Research has various components: capacity, productivity and utility. The first, capacity, can be developed. The second is productivity, which does not necessary follow the first, and the third, utility, is spectacularly lacking. A great deal of research is façade, it is for show, for the purpose of statistical record with no impact on the problems of society. Prestige overwrites public purpose. There is a definite gap between production of knowledge and its use in policy practice and in solving development-related problems.

I'm sceptical about how much value for money we are receiving from our research grants. We need to tighten scrutiny. Along with being profession-centric, education must be holistic and liberal. University leaders must note that being excessively profession-oriented distorts the university education in some ways. A university's role is far broader and richer than a profession. Universities are supposed to be alive in character and not just careers. A university curriculum should not resemble a factory assembly line's blueprint.

Education as opposed to merely literacy, must be holistic, must have at least some liberal education content. If a university is true to its words, it must provide holistic education and produce well-balanced graduates who have professionalism as well as idealism, knowledge as well as wisdom, an understanding of reality, as well as the vision for what ought to be.

Mainly supplying technically sound but morally neutral human cogs in an industrial world to conclude to high production figures will not, in the long range, lead to enlightened development of human capital and society. In keeping with the imperative of liberal education, our education ministry must relook at the science-arts streaming in schools. There must be corrections against over specialisation. Our educational system is limited to developing specialisation. We're teaching more and more of less and less.

We are producing square pegs for square holes. Production of enough professionals and technocrats for the industry and the job market is an overriding goal. However, there is sufficient evidence that half or more than half of the graduates end up in roles outside of their university learning. There must also be an emphasis on town-gown relationships and community links. All university courses must have idealistic components of service to society. University faculties must straddle the divide between being people-oriented and profession-oriented.

One part of practical training or attachment period should be devoted to a compulsory component of supervised Peace Corps type of service to the community. Town-gown relationships should extend to links with NGOs, GLCs, and even international issue-based groups that are involved in wholesome quests like environment sustainability. Teach students to think, to articulate, and be independent. If our aim is to produce students who will be obedient administrative officers, compliant bureaucrats, and supporters of the status quo in every field, then we have nothing to worry about. We're doing very well. But if our aim is to produce thinking citizens who can innovate, create and think outside the box, we need to loosen up on the culture of conformity that we have created and imposed so successfully. Our entire education system is too formalistic and authoritarian. We need to look at our instructional methodology and see how participative they are. We need to examine our AUKU Act to see how far this law stultifies the intellectual and emotional growth of our youth. Aside from this failed and possibly futile effort to depoliticise the universities, these laws have contributed to the culture of fear and conformity, sapped out initiative, bureaucratized students' lives and reduced university students to the level of school kids.

The 2012 amendments to AUKU have permitted students' movement in politics outside the campus. But the overall university set-up in relation to students remains authoritarian. We need now new thinking to enhance students' participation in decisions that affect their lives. I'm aware that some beginnings have been made (with regard to) students' representations on board committees on students' welfare, but this is mostly nominal. A new thinking is needed and if you ask me the time has come to think whether a student union or council should be represented on the main board of the university.

A global perspective must be indicated, the curricular must show awareness of an increasing globalised world; additionally, the student body as well as the staff composition must have global components.

While adopting globalisation, we must be aware of the need for intellectual decolonisation and adoption of the third world perspective.

The buzzwords today are internationalisation and globalisation. Indeed their tide is so strong that it must not be resisted; instead it must be harnessed to serve us. At the same time, we need to develop a consciousness that Asian education is heavily one-sided and suffers from a Western bias. Our programmes of education, curriculum, textbooks, icons, are all European and American. It's as if the whole of Asia and Africa was an intellectual desert. The opposite is true. For this reason, Asian universities must build their citadels of knowledge with flowers from many gardens. That will be true globalisation. University academic boards and senates must make conscious effort to include into their syllabi the works and ideas of Asian and African, and other world thinkers.

Despite the above, the danger of curriculum overload should be looked into. Perhaps, the duration of degree courses should be lengthened given the fact that our professional courses are post-secondary and not post-degree. With the incorporation of the above approaches, a balance could be achieved between the ideal of the past and the necessities of the time. At the risk of sounding heretic, I wish to say that this modern obsession with seeking the best student is not conducive to social justice. Highly motivated, intelligent, and articulate students make teaching a pleasure. But what is even more satisfying is to take ordinary students and convert them into extraordinary persons, to mould ordinary clay into works of art. This is what ITM has been doing since 1965, and beyond. I believe that entry points are less important than exit. How a student ends the race is more important than how he or she began it.

All universities should be required to run under some remedial programme for underachievers and to practise affirmative action to marginalised sectors of the population. The Vice Chancellor of UiTM, Dato' Sri Saiful Hamid, recently commenced a Destini Anak Bangsa programme that offers a second chance to underachievers. If they succeed in a special designed course, they're given upward mobility into the diploma programme. This must have been over the last 35 years. I think UiTM has been taking too many bright students and ignoring those people who didn't have so many A's. So I think now they are having second thought about it.

I believe that determining suitability of candidates for university courses, especially a professional course on the basis of SPM or STPM results is too naïve and superficial. With all their merits, SPM, STPM results test only narrow range of abilities.

This book contains the proceedings of the 16th Perdana Discourse Series on "Malaysia's Higher Education: In Need Of Radical Transformation?" which took place on the 24th of April 2013. The Discourse featured Tan Sri Dato' Seri Utama Arshad Ayub, Pro-Chancellor, UiTM, as keynote speaker, and panellists Professor Dato' Dr. Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid, Deputy Chancellor of INTI University College, Professor Dato' Sri Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin, Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia and Ms Elizabeth Lee, Senior Executive Director of Sunway University.

This Discourse is part of the Perdana Discourse Series, organised by Perdana Leadership Foundation and UiTM. The objectives of the Discourse are to facilitate inter-generational knowledge-sharing and dialogue, as well as to encourage interest in public policy and its impact on nation building.

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