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Remarks on the purposes of a university education: Can theory be distinguished from practice?

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Introduction

There are many dimensions to a university education, the experiences, the curriculum itself, the method of learning and teaching, amongst others fall under the remit of what universities do today. The article presented here will only limit the discussion on university education based on the university curriculum. This is aside from the multitudes of very different institutions calling themselves 'universities', many of which a few decades ago would not even be remotely considered as one. The university curriculum: the academic program students follow to earn their degrees, is also an expression of what the university believes education means. In recent times, many are of the view that what goes behind university walls lacks utility in the so-called real world.

This article is an attempt to explore and address basic assumptions of the university curriculum and the context in which universities have developed since the middle of the nineteenth century which saw the expansion of what has come to be known as the 'modern' university. This is because

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the university, through time, has always had to absorb and accumulate changing aspirations-and perhaps also the presumptions- of successive generations and not surprisingly, it has also come to disappoint them. Therefore, a cursory narrative based on historical events is given to illuminate the fact that university dons are often in conflict as opposed to being in unison about the nature and purpose of a university education.

Views articles are not meant to serve as a comprehensive discussion over what clearly is a very broad and complex subject. What this short piece hopes to do is to stimulate dialogue on an issue of public discourse that has directly and indirectly shape the way we think about university education in Malaysia.

Background

In early 2002, the President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers began what he termed as "the most comprehensive review of Harvard's curriculum in a century" (Lewis, 2006)[1]. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, William C. Kirby promised from the outset to ask the most fundamental question "What will it mean to be an educated woman or man in the first quarter of the 21st century?". Two years later, after setting up a dedicated committee for the arduous task, a draft report on the new general education requirement floated within the grounds of the university. One member of the committee responsible for the report described its substance in this way; "In the end the committee thought the best thing was to put a row of empty bottles up there and see how the faculty wanted to fill them". How could the faculty of a great university talk for two years about the most basic questions of undergraduate education and come up with a curriculum consisting of empty bottles?

"Certainly there were operational problems with the review. The president (Lawrence Summers) was inexperienced, overly ambitious and impatient……the review violated two fundamental engineering principles: Understand what problem you are trying to solve before you design a solution, and don't change so many things at once that you won't know what cause has what effect"

(Lewis, H.R, 2006: pg 24)

On the positive side is the fact that Harvard asked the most salient question for a university education, "What will it mean to be an ***educated person***…?", and this curriculum review is conducted every 25 years. The exercise done in Harvard exemplifies the difficulties and continuous debates of the direction of a university curriculum faced even by one of the great universities of our time.

Most modern academic institutions are struggling with the philosophical underpinnings of the university and its place in the modern society[2]. The issues raised include the place of religion or

[1] Lewis, H.R., 2006, "Excellence without a Soul" 2006, Lewis was the Former Dean of Harvard College.
[2] Carnochan, W.B, 1993, "The Battleground of the Curriculum". Carnochan is Richard W. Lyman Professor of the Humanities at Stanford University.

moral values in the university setting, the competing claims of liberal and professional education i.e. on whether education should be looked upon in its 'usefulness' for the 'real world', and even the character of the academic community.

Liberal education and the makings of a 'Perfect Gentleman'

Newman's essays "The Idea of a University" published in 1852 have arguably been the most influential piece of work in Western civilization regarding the public ideals of higher education (Turner, 1996). No other book on the character and purposes of universities has received so frequent citations and praise by other academic commentators. Two primary themes inform the *Idea of a University,* both contribute to the moral ethos of the book, which has attracted many readers, and which has caused considerable difficulty to others. These are, first, Newman's contention that a university must include theology as part of its curriculum and second, his assertion that a university should teach universal knowledge as an end in itself. For the purposes of this paper, the latter theme shall be discussed further in this essay.

The basis of liberal education in Newman's writings refers to the phenomenon of the natural history of civilization development. This achievement included the rise of literature; pursuit of the arts, the establishment of civil society; and the generation of scientific study. Knowledge of this natural human development and accomplishment, whether in literature, history, or science, constituted for Newman the basis of liberal education. Disciplined knowledge of these subjects produced the gentleman.

" It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life;- these are the con-natural qualities of a large knowledge; they are objects of a university….."

(John Henry Newman ,in Turner, F.M. (ed.) 1996: pp89-90)

For Newman, liberal education will lead to 'intellectual excellence'. He emphasized that liberal learning would bring the mind to form; it will establish a habit of mind. Just as the human body needs exercise to bring its essence to its peak, so does the mind, it needs to be cultivated and disciplined to achieve clarity of thought and intellect.

Liberal education and social mobility

Within Newman's ideal that educating the young as an end in itself, there also lurked more worldliness than may at first appear. Later teachers, using Newman's language, have often urged their students not to be overly concerned with social mobility or with relating their education to future employment. They are well intentioned and properly seek to produce students who will have moral lives and imaginations beyond the world they work in. Yet Newman's view was more complicated and subtle.

Newman had no doubt that a university education was a path to social advancement, and he understood that many of the Irish Catholic youth that would attend his university in Dublin lacked social skill. He did not doubt that the education he advocated would allow them to function within the genteel society, which the lack of education and the prejudice of the Victorian age had closed

to their forebears. He knew from his Oxford days that non-utilitarian university learning opened the higher echelons of British society more rapidly than professional and useful knowledge. There was thus no little social utility to a 'vocationally useless education'.[3]

A liberal education conceived as an end in itself may not have embraced professional knowledge in the middle of the nineteenth century, but it was nonetheless the mode of learning that led to social mobility throughout the British Isles and across Europe. Social mobility for their sons was one of the promises Newman implicitly made to the Irish Catholic layperson:

"Robbed, oppressed and thrust aside, Catholics on this islands have not been in the condition for centuries to attempt the sort of education which is necessary for the man of the world, the statesman, the landholder or the opulent gentlemen…….our desideratum is, not the manners and habits of gentlemen. but the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers…..this is the real cultivation of mind…"

(John Henry Newman, in Turner, F.M. (ed.) 1996: p7)

The cultivation of mind and the universities in context

From the continuous debates that has been around for 900 years, the 'ancients'/'moderns', the battle of the books, Newman's *Idea* and the emergence of the modern university in Germany, from the debates of Charles Elliot and James McCosh, one cannot but agree that universities plays a pivotal role in the fluid process of the making (or unmaking) of national culture. That has always been its historic Raison-de'tre. Universities are not merely tools for accumulation and production of knowledge and its dissemination, but more fundamentally it is the community where the highest and most esteemed values in society reside. Hence in this sense, the university is more than just mere institution; it is the symbolic paragon of the collective ideals within that specific time and locality.

For much of this century the 'idea' of the university has been, or has appeared to be, a straightforward if not a settled matter. It was unashamedly an elite institution which was attended by at most twentieth of the population. Dons were upper middle-class people who most seemed to belong to the cloistered atmosphere of the campus. Their job was to expose students to what Mathew Arnold had described in 1867 as 'the best that has been thought and known in the world'. The primary purpose of the university was 'the pursuit of true judgment' and within the realm of knowledge there existed a clear hierarchy of themes and skills. When a graduate emerged from the process she (usually) display characteristics which distinguished the 'educated' person from the 'uneducated'. There was much local diversity but the ideal, the motivating force, was universal and seemed obvious from 1860 onwards.

Of course, universities were very different in 1960 than 1860, perhaps more than any other reason because of the relentless trend towards subject specialization as society and economy

[3] During the second half of the century, under the guidance of Benjamin Jowett, professor of Greek at Oxford, the civil service examinations for Britain and India were designed that persons skilled in Greek and Latin had a very considerable advantage over persons trained in modern languages.

demanded greater and greater expertise. There was a steady process of differentiation and splintering of zones of knowledge which rendered it increasingly hard to state the goals which were held common by all areas of the academic community (Clark,1983).Writing at the turn of the century, Max Weber observed that the separation of the expert from the 'cultivated man' underlay the then prevailing debates about the purposes of higher education.

One general prevailing consensus is that universities today have become a crucial rite de passage in the development of citizens. It provides a transformative experience in people's lives when identities may be decisively shaped and lasting relationships and associations contracted (Pascarella & Terenzini,1991). Moreover, that university experience provides a basis for the cultivation of independence of thought which underpins a healthy democracy (Barnett, 1994). This entails the provisions of tools and realms of knowledge which provoke thinking, so that students are equipped to evaluate and examine the situations that they encounter later in life. The experience, moreover, enables the development of 'narratives of engagement' with present and past circumstances, an essential element of a vibrant culture.

The 'theoretical' and 'practical' dimensions of knowledge

Recent attempts have been made by several universities to introduce changes in the teaching methodology of faculty members, with the aim of incorporating elements which would facilitate the convergence of "thinking' and 'doing' (assuming that there is a difference to begin with). It is then hoped that these elements will allow effective students (they did get a degree) to become 'effective workers' in the 'real world'. But is this a real problem?

A major misunderstanding occurs when knowledge is seen to have 'theoretical' (or 'ideal') and 'practical' dimensions. (Barzun, 2002; Malek, 2004). It is a fundamental mistake to assume that not only do such distinctions exist, but that they are also essential. These distinctions are arguably, illusory. Modern universities exist with 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 to the demands of the professional codes and bodies. Professional codes, before it was institutionalized, has a direct reference to the 'gentleman's agreement', which is a code of conduct to 'behave like a gentleman', a theme not entirely remote from Newman's ideals.

In an address to a congregation of women graduates towards the end of the nineteenth century, William James stated that 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 but less visible ends by guiding thought and conduct at large. The former is widely known as 'know-how' that is 'how' to perform an act. The latter is 'cultivation' which exhorts the person performing the act to understand 'why' the act should be done in the first place. As Oliver Wendell Holmes commented "it is not just a question of how the law works, but more properly, what the law is". It appears that 'both'(if one is still adamant to make a distinction between 'theory' and 'practice') dimensions are complementary and of equal importance.

It seems obvious that before an act can take place, an idea of some kind or another will inform it. Hence the definition of ideas and actions goes hand in hand. Second, ideas by their very nature do not exist in isolation-they are interconnected. And third, even ideas that are, on the surface appear

to be abstract and remote i.e.: the nature of numbers, atoms, rights- it generally addresses many of the most fundamental ways in which civilization is reflected upon. To suggest that abstract ideas are, in any way, less useful than ideas that one could, (as we imagine), be more readily applied to provide solutions for the 'real world' is patently a misconception. It is a total misunderstanding of what ideas are and what they are not.

Conclusion

The university curriculum- the academic program students follow to earn their degrees; is more than a book of requirements and regulations. It is also an expression of what a university believes an education might mean. Universities are under attack for being too theoretical in educating students which leave in turn; graduates who are apparently ill-prepared for the 'real world'.

This paper has put forward the case that there is at best, an illusory distinction between 'theory' and 'practice' of university education. Most academics are fully aware of the unitary nature of thinking and doing, theory and practice hence, the definition of ideas and actions goes hand in hand. The unfortunate part is that some who are vocal in this discourse seem to lack a more substantive appreciation and understanding of what universities are, in terms of their basic philosophy, purposes, both in historical and contemporary terms.

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