

# SOUTHEAST ASIA RISING!

Proceedings of The 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Southeast Asia (ICONSEA2013)  
Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur



Edited by

Hanafi Hussin, Mohammad Raduan Mohd Ariff, Lowell B. Bautista, Rodney C. Jubilado,  
Christine Yun May Yoong, Desiree Quintero, Wayland Quintero & Jem R. Javier

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11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2013

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Christine Yun May Yong, Desiree Quintero, Waylang Quintero & Jem R. Javier



Conference on Southeast Asia 2013  
Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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In Kuala Lumpur the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference was sponsored by  
the University of Malaya and Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya

Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> ICONSEA is sponsored by  
the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya

The publication was compiled by a group effort with volunteers from the Department of Southeast Asian Studies  
and its networking on the Southeast Asian Studies

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Printer

Universiti Malaya Press

Printed copies

50

Electric copies

150

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

Conference on Southeast Asia (5<sup>th</sup>: 2013 Kuala Lumpur)

Proceeding of the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference on Southeast Asia: Southeast Asia Rising editors Hanafi Hussin ... [et.al]

ISBN 978-967-0380-38-4

Southeast Asia Rising – Southeast Asia-Congresses. 2. Politic-economy-social, cultural

Hanafi Hussin. II. Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya

THE LIVING STRATEGY OF THE URBAN FOLKS: A CASE STUDY OF BDC, KUCHING, SARAWAK

**Elfitra & Jendrius (Andalas University, INDONESIA) (234)**

OIL PALM PLANTATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN A RURAL COMMUNITY IN WEST PASAMAN, INDONESIA

**Sheila Devi Michael (University of Malaya) (240)**

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN MALAYSIA: THE RESPONSE OF THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT

**Robert Tua Siregar (University of Simalungun, North Sumatera, Indonesia) (254)**

SUMBER POTENSI LOKAL DALAM PENATAAN RUANG ((Study Kasus: Penataan Ruang Di Kabupaten Toba Samosir)

**Syafrida Hafni Sahir (KOPERTIS WILAYAH I, Indonesia) (263)**

A FACTOR ANALYSIS OF ROTATING CREDIT ASSOCIATION OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN MEDAN INDONESIA

**Nursyirwan Effendi (Andalas University, West Sumatra, Indonesia) (270)**

RURAL ETHNIC ENTREPRENEURIALISM IN INDONESIA: AN OUTGOING ETHNICITY IN THE GLOBAL MARKET CONNECTION?

### **THEME THREE: EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA (287-370)**

**Ederson Delos TrinoTápia (University of Makati, Philippines) (288)**

TOWARDS AN ASEAN COMMUNITY: EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES IN THE PHILIPPINES

**Cheryl Chelliah Thiruchelvam & Sarena Abdullah (Sunway University and Universiti Sains Malaysia) (298)**

LIBERALIZING HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION INTO ITS SUBJECTS

**Dearlina Sinaga (Fakultas keguruan ilmu Pendidikan Univ. HKBP Nommensen, Medan) (306)**

PENGARUH MODEL PEMBELAJARAN *GIVING QUESTIONS AND GETTING ANSWER* TERHADAP HASIL BELAJAR EKONOMI SISWA (STUDY KASUS: SISWA KELAS X SMA METHODIST-8 MEDAN TAHUN AJARAN 2013/2014)

**Nael F. M. Hijjo (University of Malaya) (323)**

A MORPHOSYNTACTIC ANALYSIS ON MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ESSAYS WRITING IN ENGLISH CLASS

**Adrian Perez Semorlan (Western Mindanao State University, Zamboanga City, Philippines) (330)**

GLOBALIZATION OF EDUCATION AMONG STATE UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES: AN ASSESSMENT AND BASIS FOR INNOVATIVE RESPONSES

**Yancy Erbina, Mario Flores, Glecy Palaganas, Paula Pinuela, Keach San Jose, Ava Ann Semorlan, and Merlyn Violanta (Saint Anthony, Quezon City, Philippines) (352)**

DIFFERENT HOME ACTIVITIES PERFORMED BY GRADE SCHOOL PUPILS IN SCHOOL OF SAINT ANTHONY, METRO MANILA, PHILIPPINES

## **LIBERALIZING HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN ITS SUBJECTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the last decade, Malaysia launched k-economy (knowledge economy) as a step forward to move from its production based economy towards enriching its human capital. A move to face escalating challenges due to globalization; to mature from a 'developing nation' into a 'developed nation'. Even though many creative and innovative programmes were implemented in the entertainment and education industry, as well as in government and private sectors; the local graduates and work force were still unprepared to face the ultimate forces of globalization as it reached our shores. Other developed nations; the United States, Australia and New Zealand are in the midst of revolutionizing their education system; not only at the tertiary level, but even at the pre-school level. As such, the Malaysian Higher Education System should not only be producing stereotyped graduates in quantities, but should take this opportunity to revolutionize, diversify and develop its education system to produce quality graduates for the betterment and advancement of its society. Therefore this paper intends to discuss the importance of the k-economy and the reality of the current Local Higher Education and put forth a few suggestions to liberalize the higher education system in Malaysia.

*Keyword: Higher Education Malaysia, liberalization, creativity, innovation, K-economy*

### **Introduction**

“As a whole new economy based upon creativity and innovation emerges- the dawn of the ‘Creative Age’ – the importance of reinventing business strategies, corporations, communities, schools, and more is critical. Nothing can remain the same if we are to survive, let alone succeed, in this new global economy.” (Eger, 2011, p. 20)

The evolution of the university from a restrictive academic guild into a service industry; from the typical classroom/lecture based environment into a conducive environment of research, experimentation and discussion was very much needed within the local higher education terrain as noted by Waterhouse (2002, as cited in Roodhouse, 2009, p. 189). The university or any tertiary education institution for that matter needs to step away as the lesson provider or knowledge giver, instead these institutions should be conceptualized as research centres where students pursue their knowledge by developing, experimenting, and creating a hybrid by infusing and mixing different types of information and knowledge.

Compare that to the reality in the local higher education landscape now, where students have their lecture sessions on certain subjects based on textbooks, further supported by notes. Tutorials are similar as lecturers prepare questions based on past lectures which students are required to answer and discuss. Unfortunately, there is no provision in the lectures or tutorials for students to experiment, develop or manipulate the knowledge and information that they receive. Assignments, projects and exams are carried out to fulfil course requirements and more importantly to pass the paper or get outstanding results. Thus, the whole tertiary education

becomes a treadmill experience for the local graduates as they are expected to gain information and knowledge from their lecturers/facilitators instead of learning or producing it on their own.

As human capital became a significant factor in knowledge-economy, Brennan (2005, as cited in Roodhouse, 2009, p. 191) summarized that the interdisciplinary, practical, applied, informal and contextual were conceptualized as the new knowledge rather than the formal, theoretical, disciplinary, foundational and generalizability. Knowledge manipulation, application and creation at the workplace and within work itself were the required skills; instead of the typical acquired knowledge from text books and notes. However, the local labour force was inadequate of skilled, dynamic and knowledgeable candidates to fill the needs of rapid globalization. This was proven by the research carried out (by Ramlee, M.; Faridah, K.; Ruhizan M.Y.; Norzaini, A.; Hamidah, Y.; Abdul, W.M. and Sobri, T. 2008, p. 21) that showed final year university students were only modestly equipped to face the challenges of k-economy and globalisation. The reality of this scenario proves that the tertiary education framework now is still very much archetypal and mediocre as a number of the local graduates are neither proactive nor competent to meet the current demands in their workplace.

Therefore, at the dawn of the Creative Age inspired by the new knowledge, one has to be versatile and have inter-disciplinary knowledge of things in order to further develop the economy, knowledge and humanity as a whole. Regardless of our professional background, the current socio-economy demands us to go beyond and perform more than the required job description. The versatility of an individual can be traced through the creativity and innovative thinking where he/she is able to use imagination and technical skills to handle the various situations in a profession.

The need for creative and innovative graduates was further affirmed by Clarke and Budge (2010, p. 154) as in current times, creativity has become a prized skill—highly valued both by employers and higher education institutions. The significance of creativity towards the betterment of society was established even in ancient times as noted by Clarke and Budge (2010, p. 154). However, creativity became a popular agenda in Malaysia particularly in the last two decades in tandem with Vision 2020 and k-economy. A point to moot, other nations had already implemented special projects to promote and harness creativity amongst their citizens (US-National Assembly of State Art Agencies, 2009). EU established year 2009 as the year of creativity and innovation; and Australia made provisions for the arts and creativity in its national research priorities in 2009 (Clarke and Budge, 2010, p. 155).

### **Significance of Knowledge Economy**

*If we can transform our education institutions to make change part of everyday topic we study rather than the daunting future we face, creativity becomes a powerful tool”.*

(Livingston, 2010, p. 61)

With current forces of globalization shaping almost every facet of the world, the local education sector flourished, grew and became a competitive market both locally and internationally. Parallel to that, local graduates should be able to develop and apply their knowledge and skills to face different forms of challenges from various directions. Even though it seemed that many innovative and creative programmes had been implemented under the k-economy transformation programmes - such as Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and the Smart School Programme; the reality remained that our higher education system was nevertheless still examination oriented and textbooks based. This scenario was further affirmed by Tan Sri Dato’ Dzulkipli Abd Razak in his speech at the 13<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Education Summit 2009, that the local education system needed to be transformed and nurtured in order to compete on a global scale (13<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Education Summit 2009).

The Malaysian higher education system always followed guidelines, structures, syllabuses, content, examination formats, marking schemes and requirements of the traditional

British system. Hence, in contemporary times, it is imperative for the local higher education system to revolutionize its system to withstand the challenges and obstacles within the global education terrain (Shad, S.F., 2012). Consecutively, this transformation in the higher education system would not only produce local graduates of higher standards, but would also provide ground breaking findings and solutions that will put the Malaysian work force and leaders in a better position.

In order to achieve this, our higher education system needs to be liberalized. As a consequence, there is a dire need to revolutionise our higher education system, firstly by re-evaluating its contents and syllabuses, structures (examination, coursework, thesis, tutorial, lectures), goals and outcomes. Students at higher education institutions must not only be exposed to knowledge within a particular discipline but they must also understand the use of the particular knowledge and further develop it. Graduates must be acquainted with the know-how to apply the knowledge into real life situations and take it a step further.

More importantly, the term 'liberalized' must be measured within every spectrum of the higher education system - programme structure, infrastructures, subjects offered, entry requirements, academic forces, grading system, teaching and learning methods; most important of all, the quality of graduates of the 'liberalized tertiary education system'. To be a liberalized higher education institution would mean to be an unnerving, established, reformed, bold and practicing a certain amount of freedom within its realm. Sadly, tertiary institutions in Malaysia are yet to be associated and perceived with the attributes mentioned above.

To have the advantage of knowledge could be empowering in the highly competitive globalized world. With the new economy agenda in hand, the local work force would be key players in transforming the socio-economic landscape in Malaysia. In addition to that, global economy has become complex and sensitive in parallel with the socio-political changes occurring around the world. This is the consequence of the information and technological age, whereby advanced knowledge would become the cutting edge of staying ahead of others, despite the area of interest or sector involved.

In order to cope with the recent needs, employees have to be adaptive towards the continuous changes; innovative and creative in problem solving and providing fresh ideas; and finally being quick learners as well as efficient. This is imperative as the global economy is transformed continuously from various directions due to new discoveries of improved technology and scientific breakthroughs. Unfortunately, a study showed that the Malaysian workforce was not fully prepared to further develop and implement k-economy in its true volume (Ramlee, M. and Abu, A., 2004, p.54). Govindan (2000, as cited in Ramlee, M. & Abu, A., 2004, p. 54) posited that among the critical elements that were lacking to spur the k-economy in Malaysia were inadequacy of training infrastructure and education that supported the k-economy, inadequate knowledge and skilled human resource.

On top of that, in another study carried out by Ramlee, M. (1999), it was noted that employers preferred graduates from vocational and technical programmes compared to those from academic programmes (Ramlee, M. and Abu, A., 2004, p.54). In the same study, employers also highlighted the lack of motivation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, interpersonal and entrepreneur skills among their employees (Ramlee, M. and Abu, A., 2004, p.54). These are a few of the traits that hinder employment. This clearly shows the deficiencies in our current higher education system which must be addressed orderly and accurately to produce graduates to navigate and enhance the k-economy in Malaysia. Ramlee, M. and Abu, A. (2004) stated: "This requires our education system to produce graduates with relevant knowledge, critical and better skills as well as proper attitudes." (p.54). It would be essential for key players (policy makers, academic forces, content providers, and especially tertiary education students) to take note of the current situation and make the necessary changes.

### **The Current Reality of Local Higher Education**

Notwithstanding that it had been more than a decade since the launch of k-economy, the Malaysian work-force still lacked skilled and knowledgeable workers, such as engineers, scientists and ICT specialists (Ramlee, M.; Faridah, K.; Ruhizan M.Y.; Norzaini, A.; Hamidah, Y.; Abdul, W.M. and Sobri, T. 2008, p. 1). In addition, in a recent study of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) carried out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Malaysia's score was below average (Tunku, M.P. 2012, p. 21). The PISA was a test to examine the correlation between various countries' performances against the availability of their natural resources. Malaysia participated for the first time, and the test was carried out in Bahasa Malaysia. However countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Japan and Finland who had lesser natural resources, out-performed Malaysia.

With technological advancements and tougher competitions transforming the world vastly, it is important for future leaders and the workforce (local graduates) to be equipped with adequate knowledge, skills and attitude. As such, the higher education institutions in Malaysia are at a juncture to instil, nurture and harness creativity among its students. The Ministry of Higher Education, policy makers, higher education institutions and academics need to work together to integrate creativity and innovation into the tertiary education framework. Undoubtedly, the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) and *MyQuest*, government agencies operating under the Ministry of Education (MOE), ensured 'quality control' of the tertiary education in Malaysia by making positive changes and development within the higher education terrain. On the contrary, institutions, colleges, universities and university colleges in particular used desperate measures to fulfil the requirements either one or both of these agencies.

Among some of these unethical acts or desperate situations that clouded the higher education landscape in Malaysia are: (a) make believe situations – resources and facilities of a particular higher education institution were rented and brought in on the specific day of the visit by these agencies, (b) if the particular college was a branch or sister-company of an established university or university college, the library resources were 'claimed' to be on a sharing basis when in reality they were not (c) false certificates of qualification of academics in certain institutions, (d) course syllabuses and outlines were created primarily to fit the teaching and learning taxonomy where the true essence (content) and teaching methods (approach) of the course or subject were often subjugated and even dismissed in order to accommodate the guidelines and framework, (e) opinions, feedbacks and suggestions from the panels of both these agencies varied amongst institutions and auditing panels which later as a whole defeated the purpose of quality assurance, controls and ratings, and finally (f) auditors and panel members of both the MQA and *MyQuest* differed between institutions and disciplines in terms of quality, experience, expectation, feedbacks and approval; therefore leading to a more diluted quality of education, graduates and qualifications within a specific discipline. As a result, higher education in Malaysia became commercialized as institutions treated higher education as a business commodity, placing the quality of education, graduates and academics at stake. Therefore, higher education in Malaysia still lacked recognition from other developed countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and US.

As the nation aspires to achieve the status of industrialized nation from its current 'developing nation' status, a knowledgeable society, skilled and innovative work force and dynamic ICT professionals are essential to realize Vision 2020. This was affirmed by the Economic Research Service Department's statement (2000, as cited in Ramlee, M. and Abu, A. 2004): "For Malaysia to produce a pool of k-leaders and k-workers, the educational system needs to be revamped and restructured" (p. 56). Therefore it is vital for Malaysia to prepare its future work force and leaders who are competitive globally, not only locally. The country needs movers and shakers able to think out-of-the-box; innovatively use the available resources, and at the same time be flexible to adapt dynamically towards transformations taking shape within the socio-economical terrain. With such challenges and responsibilities placed upon their shoulders, it is



vital for the local graduates who would become the future work force and leaders to be adequately equipped both intellectually and emotionally.

As the world becomes more competitive with unlimited information and knowledge sharing, wide array of resources and increased transparency; the future work force and human capital has to be creative and innovative in problem solving as well as in creating new markets and economic diversity. Therefore, as posited by Md. Aroff (13<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Education Summit 2009) it is vital for universities to produce graduates who are able to think across disciplines, adaptable to fluctuating situations, as well as cultivate advanced technical dexterity together with leadership and communication skills. This is significant in demanding situations where crisp and concise decisions are needed.

Although creativity is commonly related to art, the definition of creativity may not be particularly enclosed within the genre of art specifically; instead the context of creativity may be applied to every facet of our daily life (economy, culture, socio-political terrain, entertainment, sport, etc). In order to improve, sustain and further develop humanity together with modernity, 'creative' and 'innovative' are two terms that could provide answers and solutions as the world is faced with tougher challenges and steeper competitions. However, in the current higher education landscape in Malaysia, the local graduates are still lacking in creativity and innovative thinking skills to further develop knowledge. As highlighted by Md. Aroff (13<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Education Summit 2009); "... danger exists in cultivating the culture of conformity at the expense of creativity in pursuit of 'test-takers' instead of birthing innovative and creative thinkers."

Among the few contributing factors that led to this culture amongst our local graduates and these dire situations in our current work force are (a) the local education system was based upon the 'restricted and conventional' British education system, (b) the knowledge discipline was separated within each doctrine narrowing the horizon of the knowledge continuum and possibilities of creating new knowledge discipline, (c) antiquated education structures left no room for creativity or even curiosity as students were asked to follow existing systems, formulae, procedures and so on, (d) creativity was never emphasized since subjects related to science and mathematics were the preferred and safer choice and (d) parents still preferred their children to study or major in science, mathematics or engineering disciplines for a broader career choice.

Since the arts are usually synonymous with creativity, it has always been conceived only suitable for those who are academically weak. This could be exemplified in courses related to art (visual design, music, fine arts, theatre, product design, etc.) having minimal entry requirements and given the least priority in terms of student enrolment as well as resource allocation of an institution as these courses are believed to be non-technical. Even at primary and secondary levels, Malaysia still lacks qualified art educators and creative thinkers to transform the educational landscape. As a result, currently, art courses that actually build students' creativity, analytical skills and imagination are subjugated as they are not associated with intellectual skills. The current higher education system leaves no room for transformation and implementing creativity as there are many 'red tapes' and stringent requirements to teach these subjects at tertiary level. Therefore, it is suggested that the above mentioned factors indirectly contributed to the lack of creativity among local graduates as creativity or the arts were never given equal priority, acknowledgement, and provision as other disciplines related to science and mathematics.

### **Liberalizing Malaysia's Higher Education System: A Few Suggestions**

Despite the setbacks and glitches, it is still not too late for the higher education institutions in Malaysia to re-evaluate, re-structure and re-new itself. As creativity and innovation have become the prime attributes of human capital, it is necessary to instil and implement the element of creativity into the higher education framework. As such, this paper intends to **put forth a few suggestions to liberalize the higher education system in Malaysia.**

**Firstly**, it would be essential for the higher education institutions to unsheathe themselves from traditional pedagogies heavily based on the old British framework and structure that hindered environments in search of new experience and new knowledge. Nowadays,

examinations are based on theoretical understanding of particular subjects regardless whether science, economics or art that demands students to memorize contents from their textbook and notes. Higher education institutions need to change the way they grade students through the breakdown of examinations, tests, assignments and projects. Assignments and projects during the course duration for example, should be designed to harness the creativity of the students when they explore the unknown and experiment with different subject matters.

**Secondly**, this paper strongly suggests infusing all the subjects taught at higher education institutions with the history, the scientific as well as the artistic aspects as a wholesome process of learning. This is to enforce a multidisciplinary approach to teaching and learning of a particular subject so that the end result is applicable to real life situations as well as the students getting a well-rounded education. A multidisciplinary model for a particular subject enables students to collaborate and integrate knowledge and information rather than cleaving a particular subject within its respective discipline. By doing so students will be able to see the connections of different information and analyse them for better use. A proof of this was St. Augustine School in New York where subjects of different disciplines were infused into its teaching and learning processes. As a result, a majority of the students were able to meet the New York academic standards albeit the fact that they came from troubled and impoverished backgrounds (Eger, 2011, p. 20). A second case was High Tech High in San Diego which used the similar infusion technique in their teachings whereby there were no specific classes according to the conventional subjects. Instead students were taught to distinguish the connection of the knowledge they acquired with the real world. More interestingly, students and faculty members collaborated every semester working on real world problems that inevitably required them to apply knowledge of various disciplines (Eger, 2011, p.20).

This multidisciplinary approach could also be implemented by making amendments and localize course structures, guidelines, examinations and marking in order to suit the local demands, needs and industry. The South East Asian region, especially Malaysia has a rich socio-cultural heritage as well as political economic diversity with a long standing history. In order to be ahead of others in this age of globalisation, it will do well for the higher education providers to ‘essentialise’ their content to the local needs instead of merely following the west.

**Thirdly**, higher education institutions should be given autonomy to govern and implement courses that are essentialist in nature – in terms of subject content, examinations and marking, delivery methods, entry requirements and academic manpower. It is not necessary for governing agencies to standardize the courses and programmes across the country. Instead each institution and course can vary and have its own strengths and differences in order to further develop knowledge as a whole. As such, this would pave the way for each institution and its programme to be unique and essential within its own realm. Notably, this would then further contribute towards academia development in general, and also towards the industrial and economic sectors of the country inevitably. As a case in point, Multimedia University (MMU) well established for its Creative Multimedia courses locally, has contributed towards the development of media arts, digital animation, digital interactivity and communication technology in Malaysia since the early 2000’s. Consecutively, the Ministry of Education needs to improve its role as policy maker and be more stringent with power and implementation to ensure higher education institutions are responsible for the quality of graduates they produce irrespective of course and discipline. At the same time, higher education institutions should be penalized heavily for any misconduct or power abuse regarding issues pertaining to academic matters (academicians, plagiarisms, non-fulfilling academic requirements, fake documentations, low passing rate, to name a few).

**Lastly**, it will do well if the parochial notion that mathematics and science disciplines are highly intellectual and are better options compared to subjects of art and music is rejected or curbed. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, creativity and innovation are the driving factors of success and among the highly prized skills sought by employers and organisations. This was further acknowledged by Eger (2011, p. 19) that: “Most analysts studying the new global economy agree that the growing creative and innovative economy presents a central factor in defining future success”. What is

lacking in Malaysia is the due recognition and awareness towards the arts. Currently there is an acute lack of exposure and information in subjects and programmes that are related to the arts, in the media, academia and society as a whole. It will serve well for the younger generation if arts were given the same priority and importance as mathematics and science so that they will have a bigger and better understanding of information as well as knowledge. Perhaps, it is time to step back and take a new and fresh approach to this matter.

## Conclusion

“Policies will have to change with the times, but they must be in line with the underlying principle of what is best for the future of the country and its diverse set of people; that direction and principle must be cast in stone.”

(Tunku Munawirah Putra, 2012, Sunday Star, p. 23)

In the current unprecedented socio-economic situation, it is imperative for the higher education system to re-evaluate and re-vamp its structure and content. The higher education institutions in Malaysia are at a point where knowledge and information are disseminated to the students through teaching, instead of learning. As highlighted by Livingston (2010, p. 60), a university or any higher education institution should be a place that provides an opportunity for learning, not teaching. The interaction, knowledge sharing and exchange between the lecturer or facilitator and students should produce a new and fresh idea, which further stimulates the use of creativity, problem solving, analytical skills and innovativeness. Higher education institutions should be the platform for both facilitators/lecturers and students alike to learn from one another.

Unfortunately, this is not the case in Malaysia, as local higher education institutions are commonly misconstrued by both students and parents as information and paper qualification providers. The idea to learn, experiment, research and develop intellectually is marginalised or even discarded partially if not totally in the competitiveness of the materialistic world. If we are to be internationally recognized and do well in the global socio-economic arena, the human capital should shoulder the responsibility – starting from the local graduates. Now, more than ever, the higher education system in Malaysia needs to be liberalized and transformed for the betterment of the future generation at all costs. Indeed, it is the main responsibility of the Ministry of Education in Malaysia to create a dynamic equilibrium between the academia, the industry, and the service sector.

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