



Humaniversity: humanising the university

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Comment

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IN my annual address for 2011 to the university community last week, I spoke about Humaniversity: Transformation to Humanise the University.

This is perhaps the culmination of 11 years of provoking it to look for new vistas to give meaning to universities, and higher education, in particular.

Over the last decade, the threat against the university as an institution in its own right has never been more intense. Drawing an analogy between the university and a frog in simmering water, universities have, by and large, accommodated the slow boil so far.

Perhaps tertiary institutions are unaware that soon the water will boil over, and like the frog, they will no longer be able to "jump out".

Then we have to face what is called a "dead university" scenario -- which was identified at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Scenario Planning workshop five years ago -- if the inertia in academic leadership continues.

Many universities and tertiary education systems are under an array of economic, geo-political and hegemonic cultural siege that are dramatically changing higher education as we know it.

This view is shared by Cary Nelson, Professor Emeritus at University of Illinois, the United States in his book, *No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York University Press, 2010). He blames the erosion of the fundamental principles of higher education, namely academic freedom, shared governance and tenure to a lengthy list of trends and forces -- including corporatisation and globalisation.

Nelson is president of the American Association of University Professors, the largest non-profit multidisciplinary professional organisation for academic staff in the US.

That he bemoaned what universities are undergoing adds to many voices of dissent in academic circles, which further increases the uncertainties of the future of education.

When a university's culture is subjected to intrusive micromanagement at various levels, it can only serve to create fear, which undermines the notion of free inquiry upon which knowledge and innovations blossom. This is a common phenomenon in our universities.

As a way out, many academics prefer to "insulate" themselves by being risk-averse and closing their minds to articulating new and bold ideas and concepts, which are radical enough to spark a transformation.

A safer bet is to focus on the "me-first" syndrome that is devoid of human empathy due to their disengagement from societal needs and wants.

Over time, universities serve as no more than a part of the mechanisation processes despite the severe imbalances they cause to the ecosystem, human well-being and humanity as a whole.

It is worse when such an imbalance tends to dehumanise the larger sector of the global population, especially in the developing world.

Nelson cited the "demand for instrumentalisation" -- which is skewing the curricula towards job training and reducing the preparation of students for citizenry in a democracy -- as an "anachronism".

In other words, today's education greases the cogs in a dysfunctional mechanised world dictated by the fancies of shareholders who seek to dominate the education sector.

The impetus to humanise universities (and education) is to offset such a dominating trend by reclaiming the ethos of education that regards people as valued members of the community anchored in virtues that nourish humanity as their core responsibility and universally accepted commitment.

That place is what we term the "humaniversity", where the human dimensions of the university are fully restored as part of the transformation to challenge the status quo.

It is imperative to work towards the humaniversity if the vision of "people first" is to be met.

This is further underlined by the recent Human Development Report 2010, which is emphatic that "national development should be measured not just by economic growth, as had long been the practice, but also in terms of broader aspects of well-being".

Lead author Jeni Klugman says: "Our results confirm, with new data and analysis, two central contentions of the Human Development Report from the outset: human development is different from economic growth, and substantial achievements are possible even without fast growth."

Malaysia would do well to ponder on this in realigning its education agenda and processes for the future, acknowledging that the policies that advance economic growth and the humanistic aspects of development differ, although they overlap.

In so doing, we may still have the chance to jump out of the simmering water, and save future generations.

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