

Beyond straight A's

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Even at Oxford, critics are saying that students can achieve faultless results but lack intellectual curiosity.

OXFORD is one of the world's oldest universities in the world and, while participating in the Round Table on Higher Education Leadership there recently, I appreciated its meticulous education system.

Based on centuries of tradition, students are individually tutored after being hand-picked through a laborious application and interview process.

Oxford is one of the few universities in the world, and one of the two in Britain (the other being Cambridge), that is steeped in tradition.

Evidently, even Oxford is not spared some sort of criticism for reforms. How this will shape Oxford is anyone's guess. For sure, among the world's best, too, there are problems.

One such problem is articulated by Susan Greenfield, a professor of pharmacology at Oxford, a baroness and a famous author related to the brain.

She expressed concern over the type of students that the university has to contend with lately. In an article entitled "Beyond Straight As" (*New Statesman*, June 27) she lamented that model students can achieve faultless results but lack intellectual curiosity.



INDOMITABLE SPIRIT: The Oxford University Boat Race team exemplifies the determination to excel. Reuters picture

Greenfield is surprised students applying to the university not only excelled in studies but also engaged in extramural activities.

To quote Greenfield: "It was amazing that they could have fitted everything into the school day."

The question then is how to differentiate these star students given their faultless academic records. What critical qualities does one look for? Here is where the problem begins.

Even at Oxford, the issue of "mismatch between the assured, stellar performance that was recorded on paper and the persona of the individual" is becoming apparent, based on Greenfield's experiences.

"First was the sadly detectable recourse to pre-prepared answers: 'I would like to be a doctor because I would like to combine science with working with people.'

"Challenged why anyone would want to be a 'people person', they responded with a sad half-smile, a nervous giggle, a shrug or a whispered 'I just do'.

"This would have been the time for a truly desirable candidate to come through with a truly original answer. And therein lies the problem."

Greenfield's lament is also the story of the majority of Malaysian students who have also their strings of As. But we seem to stop at that because we are totally reliant on academic achievements alone.

Unfortunately, examinations are becoming the end in themselves, instead of being a means to an end as Greenfield observed.

In extreme cases, one might view schools (and universities) as exam factories with the product being the all-important "A" grades.

The obsession with straight As, with no drive for curiosity and creativity and lacking original and new ideas, seems to miss the point of what education is all about.

In other words, the ability, tenacity, talent and courage to ask the right questions are even more important than providing true or false answers.

However, the general tendency is to conform and comply, unwilling to ask the more difficult questions for fear of being outcast and ostracised.

Whatever the case, the world today is no longer as simple as black or white, right or wrong, or us or them.

Often, it is much more complex, demanding answers that defy the obvious.

It demands thinking out-of-the-box since in many ways conformity is redundant in today's fast-changing world of dreamers and visionaries. Anything less will only result in more of the same which is not good enough because it does not add value or anything new.

As aptly summarised by the words on the canvas mural hanging in Rhodes House, where the Oxford Round Table was held: "Dreamers and visionaries made civilisations".

It is not surprising therefore that to be able to study in Oxford, as a Rhodes scholar for example, scholarly (not just academic) achievements is only one of four criteria that must be fulfilled as stipulated by its founder, Cecil Rhodes.

To qualify for a Rhodes fellowship, the oldest international and prestigious fellowship, the founder stipulated four qualities (www.mercer.edu/nfs/RhodesScholarship.htm) and only one relates to "literary and scholastic attainments".

The other three seem to be "soft" and generally non-examinable qualities.

They are the energy to use one's talents to the fullest, as exemplified by fondness for and success in sports; truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship; moral force of character and instincts to lead; and to take an interest in one's fellow beings.

All these are qualities that we need to have in the making of the 21st century education. For this reason, we must support the suggestion to return to a four-year university education as it once was.

Given the explosion of information experienced by the world today, coupled with the advances in ICT, it is no way to conduct a decent course in a three-year period if the soft skills are to be seriously nurtured.

As the body of knowledge expands, it is only reasonable to allot more time for it to be absorbed, what more reflected and analysed.

In fact, in many parts of Europe, it needs more time than just four years to secure a demanding job, where employers prefer someone with post-graduate qualifications.

All these point to the necessity to review and re-look the structure of tertiary education. There are even those who are advocating a quaternary level of education, one level above the current period of higher education.

This is in addition to the suggestion that there should be more integration rather than specialisation as we move into the United Nations-sponsored Decade of Education for Sustainable Development which began this year.

While returning to a four-year tertiary education is a good beginning, clearly this is not all there is in meeting the new world-view of education.

To the graduands who are graduating from the various convocations this week, we wish them all the very best.

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