

An Old Student Remembers Changes

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I went to the University of Singapore in 1965 and the University of Malaya in 1968. Forty years have changed not only the buildings on campus but the very perceived functions of education, the rhythm of the universities and the nuances of its meaning in society. And lest we forget we must hurry to add that the society that pays and considers itself client has equally changed.

With so many changes, inside and outside the campus, it is indeed hard to even begin to note down my amorphous and quite undefined feelings.

The physical sense of the campuses is more crowded now, as the student numbers grew. In the late 1960's where there were a thousand odd students, while now the public universities have an average of 25,000. Now we are told there are more than 600 colleges and universities. When I went to Singapore there were two shared ones there and one in Kuala Lumpur.

A student was then a special breed of animal, if not from a middle class family. He was chosen to be trained and educated to serve his society. A student could not help feel that he was there for some serious social functions. Thus they demonstrated to show their commitment - sometimes against or for the government, against the American or Japanese

establishments and companies. And when a group of landless farmers cleared a piece of land in Selangor and were driven out of the plot they wrote poems and threw their boisterous support behind them. When one of the poor Baling peasants died eating the gadung tubers the whole issue of poverty in the country was uncovered and all the universities saw their students in the streets; and by the end of the day a few hundred in detention.

This is a practice in expression, in democratic statement of belief on practical and social issues, and a general statement that students were a responsible and meaningful part of their society. They also helped voice its worries and anger.

We not only felt chosen but also responsible - not least because we too came from a less well-to-do background, and were at the same time swept along by the post-1968 Paris student rebellion.

We also felt in those years that there were only a few of us. Moreover in these pre-AUCU years, there was still some freedom to say things and it was considered an important element in the upbringing of young citizens.

A student was educated to be critical in his thought, daring to speak and demonstrate his beliefs. He was not a machine memorising pages of notes and books, but was

also a thinking human being. It was the business of the university to educate and not merely to train. If he could think critically he would be quite prepared to solve problems in his prospective occupations and tasks. These are the graduates that are now at the top of the administration, business and artistic communities of the country. They also became thinkers, executors, prime ministers and opposition party members or officials of the NGO's. I feel that the student of the 2000 has a narrower sense of studentship, for his world is limited by the "Akujanji" and his social commitment has very little chance to fully develop.

To be socially conscious is also to be critically conscious. We need thinking, committed and sensitive young people for the future. For we need to compete with other young people from other countries of the world as we are rudely swept along by globalisation. Only a thinking people may be able to build a great country. And not otherwise.

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