

Tun Dr. Mahathir's Vision 2020 Universities: Views from the Humanities

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Vision 2020, the most influential policy statement in Malaysia since independence, has generated intense national discussions and attracted widespread public support as well as criticisms. The concept of Vision 2020 was introduced by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad during the tabling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. Vision 2020 acts as a way for providing a road map for transforming Malaysia into a fully developed self-sufficient economy by the year 2020. This national development plan places great emphasis on strengthening and reforming the country's higher education system through various means.

The Universities of Vision 2020

On 22 September 2006, Tun Dr. Mahathir shared his thoughts on universities of Vision 2020 during a public talk in Multimedia University. In his speech he stated four characteristics of such universities. Universities of Vision 2020, he said, would be:

1. Quality universities where knowledge is studied in great depth.
2. Known for their research findings and recognized as world class.
3. Characterized by an expansion of science fields.
4. More specialized and focusing on science.

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It is clear from Tun's speech that by the year 2020, Malaysian universities of the future are expected to be universities with outstanding quality. They are also expected to be highly specialized and place significantly high emphasis on science. But what is also clear from his speech is a reduction of emphasis on the humanities. Given the fast-changing pace and growth of scientific knowledge and innovations, Tun's vision of scientific universities in 2020 is unsurprising. Even today, there are already several private higher education institutions offering science-oriented specialized education. Such a vision, however, imposes an enormous challenge to the humanities.

Given the huge emphasis on the sciences, how relevant will the humanities be in 2020? Will fields such as literature, history and philosophy still be offered in Malaysian universities in 2020 or will they have to succumb to market demands? Ultimately, will Tun's Vision 2020 universities mark the slow death of the humanities?

To help answer these questions, IPPTN organized an intellectual discourse involving professors from the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia on 13 October 2006. The discourse was aimed at obtaining their reactions towards the former Prime Minister's Vision 2020 universities. The group comprised Professor Md Salleh Yaapar, Professor Ruslan Rainis, Professor Ambigapathy Pandian, Professor Abu Talib, Professor Harun Daud, and Associate Professor Abdul Rahman. It was chaired by the dean of the School of Humanities, Associate Professor Norizan Md Nor.

All the scholars agree with Tun Mahathir that the universities of the future will be quality universities and well known for their research results. However, Tun's idea of specialized universities drew flak from many of the professors. Professor Md Salleh Yaapar, a professor of literature, argues that an extreme specialization would lead to fragmentation of knowledge which could be detrimental to mankind. He adds that great Islamic scholars of the past such as Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Bajja never practiced specialization. In fact their knowledge was not just in-depth but also diverse. Professor Ruslan Rainis, a professor of geography, also does not believe in having specialized universities. He argues that universities must have niche areas but should not be too specialized.



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Tun’s idea of placing greater emphasis on science fields in the universities of the future received even more negative criticisms from the humanities professors. For Associate Professor Abd Rahman, Tun’s idea reflected an unbalanced education in which the humanities were ignored or disregarded. For Professor Md Salleh Yaapar, it would be wrong to disregard the humanities in the quest for scientific advancement. Sciences, he says, need the humanities especially in aspects of philosophy and religion. In the same vein, Professor Ambigapathy, a professor of English, believes that the sciences

and the humanities should work hand-in-hand. They should not be considered as opposites.

All the professors, regardless of their areas of expertise, strongly agree that the humanities are still important and relevant today and would still be important and relevant in the future. However, efforts must be made and strategies must be identified to ensure their sustainability. One possibility would be the introduction of a program called “Malaysian Studies” in higher education, as suggested by Professor Abu Talib, a professor of history. He says that this program, which could be comprised of disciplines from the humanities and social science, would allow the humanities scholars to develop and promote their expertise and excellence vis-vis research and academic activities pertaining to various important social aspects of Malaysia such as language and culture change, historical development and religious issues.

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From the rhetorics of the professors, it may be said that the humanities will still have a place in the universities of the future despite them becoming more and more specialized as envisioned by the former Prime Minister. For the humanities to remain important and relevant, mere rhetorics would not be sufficient. There must be efforts by all parties in academia to identify and implement strategies and policies that ensure the relevance and significance of the

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humanistic disciplines. There must be efforts to change and respond to changes. More crucially, there must be efforts to influence policy directions, to advance excellence, to promote the worth of the humanities in all areas and to seek and challenge new ways to make the humanistic disciplines relevant in our quest for scientific innovations.

Albert Einstein’s quote below may be pertinent in the light of the discussion above. “I do not think it is necessarily the case that science and religion are natural opposites. In fact, there is a very close connection between the two. Further, I think that science without religion is lame, and conversely, that religion without science is blind. Both are important and should work hand-in-hand”. The renowned revolutionary thinker and scientist has long noted the interdependence between the secular and the non-secular. Similar arguments could be extended to this discourse between the pure sciences and the humanities.