

Universiti Sains Malaysia: A Project for a Sustainable Future

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Universiti Sains Malaysia's (USM) sustainable university agenda places USM at the centre of philosophical and practical debates about the nature and role of a University in the current global and local context. The effort to intellectually understand and articulate the USM model is of critical importance to its success and by inference to the national interest of Malaysian society. One quick way of articulating and understanding the 'USM project' is to understand that USM's educational mission finds itself engaged and buffeted by three central problematics of the current hyper-modern age: ecological crisis, the problems of neo-liberal capitalism and religion and human dignity.

The critical assumption of USM's approach lies in the recognition that these issues are defining problems in education. In other words the challenges of knowledge creation and dissemination within the knowledge economy and university is tied closely to the kind of society and shared values that such a society aspires to and articulates. USM seeks to engage the problematic issues of Malaysian education and the global tensions within which educational practice exists within an enhanced and dialectically nuanced philosophy of sustainability. This philosophy is well grounded in contemporary social and pedagogical theory. Arguably the most significant intellectual support for such a project comes from the work of authors such as Amartya Sen whose work in sustainability ethics and the pedagogical implications of education for human and humane capabilities provides deep theoretical support for the innovative work done at USM (Sen, 1999).

A large measure of the USM strategy in engaging globalisation aims to challenge the framing of globalisation as the simple imposition of neo-liberal culture economics and social relations. The reasoning for this is important. USM is engaging in a project of cultural respect and human dignity. Perhaps a better way of putting this is to say that USM's sustainability project is fundamentally one of social justice, cognitive growth and ethical development and human respect. The fundamental point is that in its engagement with globalisation, civil society, socially constructivist pedagogy and civil Islam, USM's strategic intervention represents a democratic ethos at odds with the authoritarian and culturally oppressive ideology of neo-liberal globalisation (Cogburn, 1998; Mandal, 2000; Mustapha and Abdullah, 2001).

Framed within a broader commitment to social justice, sustainability and an engaged approach to the common good, difference and educational nurturing in USM take on a depth of meaning and articulate a direct challenge to forms of globalisation that appear to impose a one size fits all approach to Higher Education's educative mission. This one

size fits all approach of neo-liberal reform presents itself as a *fait accompli* a kind of global social Darwinism where if you do not fit the model you fail. The critical assumptions behind such an approach include an all-encompassing homogenising approach to social development and a ruthlessly unrelenting certainty in its precepts and aims as being the only or correct form of globalised practice. USM's aims stand in stark contrast to this project. Based on the ethical precepts of sustainability, USM's articulation of its educational mission draws upon the best that social and educational theory has to offer (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2006; Shore et al. 2003).

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An essential theoretical and practical point that needs to be stated is that USM's reform agenda must be viewed within multiple rubrics or spaces. Another way of saying this is to point out that USM's aims address multiple publics (Bryant, 1993; Eliasoph, 1990; Eliasoph, 1996; Fraser, 1990; Fraser, 1992). Understanding the public sphere as not one all encompassing and homogenising whole but rather as a multiplicity of voices and discourses provides us with a way of theorising the mission of a university outside of the constraints of neo-liberal hegemony. This observation in regards to USM's strategic positioning is critical to grasp if we are to fully understand the relationship between USM's University reform agenda and globalisation. The idea that neo-liberal globalisation is the final word on the meaning of globalisation is an attempt to strip from neo-liberalist dogma its normative, political and cultural values which infuse it. In other words, the claim of neo-liberalism to universality hides from view its cultural and ethical specificity.

The USM model takes seriously the important role universities play in social development and civic engagement. USM's pursuit of the common good and betterment of Malaysian society is a central plank in its educational approach. This approach is not simply expressed in homilies to improvement. Rather it is the expression of USM's essential philosophy. The clustering of Social Science and Humanities under the rubric 'social transformation' provides us with an insight into the USM approach. The recognition that global problems are interrelated and that change needs to be aimed at changing 'the system of our

society' is a clear insight into the fundamentally political and social mission of a university. The recognition that all 'sectors of the society consult and actively participate in decisions relating to sustainable development' and that the USM mission in part is 'extending its reach to the local community'(2008) is a good example of the civic role USM aims to play.

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USM's efforts in this direction are impressive, and find expression in citizenship projects and environmental projects in the broader Penang community. The specific engagement of USM with the broader society (civil society) not only links USM with the broader community, the RCE platform links USM to community activists, NGOs and others in a strong bond with broader civil society. This link to NGOs connects USM through civil society to a broader public sphere that is international and global as well as local. This connection is significant. Malaysian political and social change is in many respects finding its deepest expression in civil society and community oriented action (Weiss and Hassan, 2002; Weiss and Hassan, 2002). USM is also engaging 'the emergence of a kind of transnational civil society undergirded by non-governmental organisations' (Brown et al. 2000) as well as broader state based but more autonomous institutions such as universities (Florini, 2000).

This strategy is part of an effort to make real the promise of localised responsibility. However, its meaning is deeper than that. By linking to local communities and NGOs USM increases its legitimacy with civil society and makes its research and scholarship relevant to Malaysian society in ways more lived and practically useful. The USM strategy has important implications for pedagogy. The pedagogical approach at USM ties together an engagement with civil society and change and at the same time recognises that educational growth requires direction and moral value. Creativity must be tempered by civic responsibility. Innovation is produced through a commitment to respectful social interaction and the articulation of human values, not despite them. This combination of civic and social responsibility, cultural respect and cognitive growth is the key stone of USM's educational approach. Finally, USM's

model is an important voice within a growing Islamic public sphere.

USM's engagement within a dynamic and vigorous Islamic public sphere acts as an important conduit not only to the Islamic world but also reinvigorates the discourse of globalisation. The importance of USM's role in engaging and representing the democratic and globally responsible dialogue within Islam is a model of practice that negates otherwise simplistic caricatures and prejudices. In this sense not only is USM's practice a model for Malaysia but also a Malaysian model for the world (or sections of it). Understanding the notion of an engaged and culturally dynamic Islamic public sphere in this way provides us with a critical referent to reengaging the discourse of globalisation, education and democratic social and civic engagement. The point of the argument is not to assert that USM is an Islamic institution as such. The point is to assert that USM provides an important model within an Islamic public sphere and as an engagement outside of it. The implication and necessity of theorising this and connecting it to critiques of globalisation, effective learning for the knowledge economy and democratic change for social justice is arguably one of the most important contributions USM can make to global society and to the establishment of cultural respect and democratic theory. Framed in this fashion the notion of sustainability speaks to multiple publics and engages the idea that institutions of learning are essentially institutions of cultural change, growth and respect.

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The fusion of dignity with sustainability and the recognition that knowledge and identity are multifaceted and ultimately justified by their contribution to human betterment provides a critical anchoring to the USM project. USM's contribution to this debate is historically prescient (Ali, 1984; Bakar, 1981; Zinkin and Williams, 2006). The historical opening for the USM project lies ahead. USM provides the moral argument for the continued development of institutions within a democratic and civil Islamic public sphere (among many others) that is a critical voice for Malaysia and a necessary voice for the rest of us. USM's role in enhancing innovation, public service and individual growth is an expression of an educational mission that ties learning, innovation and creativity to sustainable human dignity and cultural recognition. This project is critical for Malaysian national development and places USM at the centre of global debates about the meaning of education.

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*Dr. James Campbell was invited by Universiti Sains Malaysia to comment on *Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow*, also known as the 'black book', and share his thoughts on the book from a humanistic point of view.