

Universiti Sains Malaysia and Looking to Malaysian Tradition for Guidance

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Higher educational reform in Malaysia is ultimately engaged with the question of developing creativity in learning and maintaining values in a changing and dynamic world. The approach of Universiti Sains Malaysia to its APEX agenda is an approach that tries to couple and develop these two important aims. The argument which is set out in the following discussion is that two seminal Malaysian thinkers provide us with a balanced path and interesting insights into how we can think through advancing these aims. These thinkers are: Syed Hussein Alatas and his brother Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. The argument in this brief discussion is not that USM's articulation of the APEX agenda through the 'University in a Garden' philosophy is necessarily a *conscious* elaboration of these thinkers' complex philosophical and social theoretical arguments. Rather these thinkers provide important and explicit indigenous theoretical contributions that can be made to the *unfolding* APEX agenda adding depth, nuance and philosophical richness to the discourse of higher educational reform which is lost should we ignore their insights and important arguments.

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Firstly, Syed Hussein Alatas provides us with a classical way to engage the problem of pedagogy, social development and cultural self respect. Syed Hussein Alatas' approach to these issues provides us with a language and philosophical insight that can help us to deeply and sagaciously understand the choices USM faces in advancing a transformative agenda. The core binary that Alatas presents is between the 'captive' mind and the 'creative' mind (Alatas, 1974). This binary is representative of a very deep and profound distinction, and it is of central importance to understanding the distinctions and issues we face in analysing USM's education reform. Syed Hussein Alatas in some of his seminal essays on this topic argues that a profound problem that manifests

in Malaysian education and indeed in Malaysian higher education is the problem of 'intellectual imperialism'. Intellectual imperialism is a manifestation of what Alatas refers to as 'Erring Modernisation' (Alatas, 1975).

Erring Modernisation is a form of modernisation that is reducible to westernisation and imperialism, and should be distinguished from modernisation that respects and engaged local culture. Erring modernisation entails cultural and intellectual imperialism and captivity of the mind. The aim of USM in its pedagogical agenda is to not repeat the mistakes of erring modernisation. For example the commitment by USM to advancing knowledge and 'creativity' and 'out-of-the-box thinking' needs some reference to a philosophy which is rooted in a concern not to simply mimic westernization (USM, 2008: 62). The commitment to 'writing our own rules and excelling and executing them without compromising our values' is a very good example of the sentiment which finds deeper philosophical support in Alatas' commitment to creativity rooted in self respect (Razak, 2009: 6). The key observation with respect to Malaysian public policy in regards to higher education is its effort at both engaging economic development while also recognising the centrality of sustainable values and culture (this approach is also reinforced in the New Economic Model's commitment to sustainability, inclusiveness and high income).

Sustainable development and growth in higher education requires a commitment to an ethical imperative. In the case of USM this imperative is found in the twin doctrines of sustainability and commitment to the bottom billions. How does USM embed its ethical vision? It does so by being 'more concerned with how to build a whole personality rather than just building people for the markets' (Chow, 2008). This concept of building the 'whole personality' which is the way in which the ethical aims of USM's philosophy can be driven can only be achieved if we do not fall into the habits of the captive mind as articulated by Alatas. At the same time this desire to engage and develop the whole personality reinforces the need for us to take seriously the spiritual and ethical dimension of higher educational reform.

This brings us to the second thinker whose ideas can help us to engage the APEX project of USM in a more nuanced and deeper fashion: Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. The idea that ultimately education is about seeking to instil a 'harmonious and rightly-balanced relationship between the man and his self' (Al-Attas, 1985: 72) is of critical importance for how we understand the relationship between values and knowledge. Given this, and given the way USM through its 'University in a Garden' approach seeks to take seriously indigenous civilisation and values it follows that thinkers such as Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas whose life work

is a profound effort to engage the problems of values and civilisation should at least be considered as having some important contribution to our debate over the meaning and direction of higher educational reform and USM's APEX agenda in particular.

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The right balance referred to by Syed Muhammed Naquib Al-Attas is a critically central issue in any discussion of what it is to be educated. In the USM example the centrality of the concept of *sejahtera*, which suggests spiritual as well as physical well being in unison may be one way of formulating and seeking to address the issue of balancing physical well being with a deeper ethical and spiritual sense (Ibrahim, 2005). The critical point in respect of APEX and USM is that the economic argument to change Malaysian pedagogical practice must be tempered by a values framework that is not reducible to individualism or unsustainable consumerism (Mohamed, 2008).

Educational Problems

The USM project seeks to balance the economic needs of the nation with a deeper ethical framework by seeking to address a fundamental problem that characterises Malaysian education: the problem of lack of creativity within educational institutions with the emphasis on rote learning and a lack of engagement with issues of substantive moral personality. Ethics is largely taught with an emphasis on rote recitation of rules lacking substantive content and cultivation of moral personality. There is also a fundamental lack of engagement with critical thinking within educational institutions. This manifests in the discourse of human capital which accentuates the utilitarian aspect of knowledge at the expense of its deeper values orientation. The competencies, practices, and identities that are necessary for students to compete and succeed in contemporary Malaysian society cannot be simply reduced to technical arguments over improvements in human capital (Wong, 2009a). As Steven Wong argues, that creativity and innovation ‘starts and ends with a living, breathing person. That person has a family, a circle of friends and a community’ (Wong, 2009b).

Educational growth, change and development if not bounded by a deeper commitment to normative principles and the social good is a pedagogy stripped of its central essence. It is like ‘a circle with no centre’ (Al-Attas, 1985: 148). The key to USM's approach is that it recognises the educational importance of having a vital and central rationale. USM is seeking to avoid the problem which characterises the contemporary university of having no ‘vital *centre*’. Syed Muhammed Naquib Al-Attas captures the problem to be avoided clearly:

‘Like a man with no personality, the modern university has no vital *centre*, no permanent underlying principle establishing its final purpose. It still pretends to contemplate the universal and even claims to possess faculties and departments as if it were the body of an organ – but it has no brain, let alone intellect and soul, except only in terms of a purely administrative function of maintenance and physical development. Its development is not guided by a *final* principle and definite purpose, except by the relative principle urging on the pursuit of knowledge incessantly, with no absolute end in view’ (Al-Attas, 1985: 147).

Syed Muhammed Naquib Al-Attas points out that an uncritical swallowing of western knowledge forms can undermine and dissipate the values and normative commitments of Malaysian society (Al-Attas, 1985). The problem of how USM ensures that its uptake of educational reform does not result in a radically westernised *disenchanted* education made utterly *profane* in the context of an uncritical following of so-called ‘best practice’ or ‘world class’ pedagogy is a central existential dilemma for the USM project. USM's educational strategy seeks to engage with and overcome these problems. Pedagogical reform, ‘needs to encourage more critical inquiry and open deliberation’ (Hashim and Tan 2009: 55) however it also needs to be imbued with a sense of ‘mans purpose for knowing’ (Al-Attas, 1985: 132).

Practical ways in which USM can engage this agenda include shifting learning to a student centered approach which focuses on ensuring that students learning are deep and embedded in understandings that are far more engaged than the type of knowledge realised through rote instruction and the recitation of formula or facts. Problem Based Learning which is currently practiced in the Health Sciences is an example of this approach (USM, 2008: 27). Another reform which can embed the ethical programme into the way knowledge is taught is the Sustainability Development Criteria which entails courses being, ‘required by their professional institutes to incorporate sustainable development into their curriculum’ (USM, 2008: 28). This is currently exercised in Engineering at USM. Finally reform to assessment strategies away from examinations and summative assessment towards formative assessment can help drive changes to teaching and learning which in turn will positively affect the development of the ‘whole personality’ and develop deeper more embedded knowledge as well as normative commitments. In short,

changes to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment which are currently underway at USM give practical support to the philosophical arguments made here.

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USM’s pedagogical agenda seeks to avoid the intellectual imperialism and values degradation that characterises the way neo-liberalism is assaulting Malaysian culture. USM’s agenda is an attempt to avoid captivity of the mind, moral confusion and ultimately second rate status that characterises an educational agenda dogged by rote learning, summative exam oriented pedagogy and a failure to take seriously the ethical responsibility of higher education. USM’s agenda is an effort inspired by an approach rooted in cultural self respect and recognition of the importance and value that Malaysian ideas and culture can bring to higher educational reform. Both Syed Hussein Alatas and Syed Muhammed Naquib Al-Attas provide significant intellectual support for this project of cultural self respect and dignity. The questions they raise and the philosophical depth they provide to trying to answer them provides useful food for thought for those interested in higher educational reform. We do not need to accept uncritically everything these authors argue, to recognise the profundity of the questions they raise and the salient importance of their insights to the problems of higher education. A higher educational discourse which fails to recognise their contribution to the debate over reform is all the poorer for it. USM’s APEX strategy of the University in a Garden is made all the richer by drawing these thinkers into the fold.

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