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Fostering university-community engagement in Malaysia

An Interview with YABhg. Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia

By Justin Yong and Munir Shuib, IPPTN, USM

Universities have traditionally functioned as institutions of higher learning devoted to the search and discovery of knowledge and truth. For the university, the development of knowledge is made through research, which is transmitted through the process of teaching and learning. An example is the establishment of the University of Halle in the 17th century, where this university was known as the earliest pioneer of free inquiry, scientific ways of thinking and rationalism in university education. However, such a conception of the university as a centre of research for the discovery of truth among elite intellectuals, commonly known as an ivory tower, has since evolved. The universities of today are pursuing a more active involvement in society with the objectives of community development in preparing its citizens with greater knowledge, nurturing students for the workforce, and producing skill-focused graduates with the underlying idea of developing individuals as human capital for the economy and society.

As universities evolved beyond the ivory tower, there has been a shift in focus as well as the involvement of different stakeholders. Particularly as the perceived social and economic importance of universities increases, the parties who may have a stake in university education have also increased. For example, employers are increasingly being considered a stakeholder in university education who may inform universities of the criteria and types of graduates they prefer, and in return, universities may then respond by tailoring their curriculum to meet the needs, expectations and the job market requirements of employers. To understand the scenario of university-community engagement in Malaysia, we spoke to Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia. Among the selected issues explored were the level of engagement of universities to their communities, respective responsibilities, the need to work together to bring about success and the contribution of Malaysian universities to their community.

Tun, how do you see the current university-community relationship in Malaysia and what is your take on the direction of university-community relations in the future?

Universities have always performed their function as centres of excellence and knowledge sharing. However, I feel the university should no longer act in this capacity alone, but should instead move towards having closer relations with the community. The key, in forging this close relationship, is for the university to know the agenda set forth by the community. For instance, in line with the aspiration of Malaysia to be an industrialised state, I believe universities ought to move in the same direction and create education in line with change. This change can then be incorporated into the experience of undergraduates who would have a part to play in the wider Malaysian industries and economy. All in all, I believe that relevance must always be maintained because the end goal of university-community engagement is for the development of the community.

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In regards to the contribution of university to their community, Tun, what are your expectations from the university?

The university-community engagement theme requires that universities contribute back to society. Among the contributions, which I am hoping for is that universities teach industrial management. I believe this is important because each industry has its own unique management know-how. The responsibility to teach values such as integrity, punctuality, and quality in industrial management and products can be contributed by the university. In addition, there is a need for specialised universities to contribute in the training of the workforce for selected fields. For example, in the past, it was commonly understood that a person qualified in geography and history can become an administrator. But the needs of today have changed. A person must be trained in public administration if he wishes to apply for the post. I see this importance increasing as the workforce becomes more specialised and industries requiring relevant skills. Equal importance must also be placed in the involvement of universities in community activities and not merely in the thinking of their responsibility to the community.

In your opinion, how far have the universities in Malaysia recognised the importance of engaging the community and what areas can be improved?

The universities in Malaysia acknowledge the need for greater involvement with the industry as well as affecting change within the community. However, efforts by the universities to affect change must be quicker as the industry evolves quickly and continuously. With the national shift from a labour intensive industry to a knowledge-driven industry, I would consider knowledge intensity as the primary focus of the universities' contribution to the community. This emphasis on speedy change is because of a “time lag” between universities knowing the needs of society and actually acting on them.

I also believe that there is a need to reassess the general universities' involvement with the community. I feel that universities in Malaysia do not give attention to the culture and value systems which play a major role when the knowledge gained is applied. It is necessary for universities and other educational institutions to instil in the students and graduates the right attitude which will ensure their knowledge will be well applied in whatever work they do. Certainly the graduates should know well the “disciplines of the workplace”, without which the knowledge cannot be translated into high productivity and quality.

Tun, what is the role and responsibility of both the university and community towards each other?

For the university, I believe they ought to increase their research activities, including their understanding of society's problems and challenges. Among these would be the issues of unemployment and illiteracy. In the past,

universities dedicated themselves mainly as a disseminator of knowledge. However, the universities of today are also expected to focus on research and development as one of their primary activities. This shift ensures a continual production and construction of new knowledge and ideas. This is the ultimate responsibility of the university to the community. The community, on the other hand, is also responsible to contribute to the universities. However, I foresee this scenario as unlikely to happen in Malaysia. The community, at large, has yet to develop a culture of repaying universities, and continues to believe that it is the responsibility of the government to provide for them. In foreign universities such as Harvard University, successful graduates would donate millions back to their alma matter. I believe this is due to a lack of gratitude on the part of the Malaysian society as the underlying reason for this scenario. This problem can be traced to a poor system of character development, whereby the community always expects to receive but not to give. When a community does not work for its own success, it will have no sense of ownership and thus no healthy sense of pride. In turn, this would result in a lack of thankfulness and gratitude.

What is the best solution for an effective cooperation to take place between the university and the community?

For effective cooperation to take place between university and the community, the Ministry of Higher Education must act as a coordinator. A lack of coordination when working together would create difficulties for both universities and the community. An example would be the increase of graduates in courses that are not in tandem with the job prospects in the economy. In this case, the Ministry of Higher Education should obtain an overall view of society's development in general. If they are able to obtain this view, they will be able to assess the relevant needs. I recalled that during my time as Prime Minister, the Ministry of Education facilitated the starting of the twinning programme of private universities as a response to the needs of the poorer but bright Malaysian Chinese students. These students were not able to self-finance their education abroad. Hence, the twinning programme was set up as an affordable alternative for these students. This example clearly illustrates the role of the Ministry of Education in coordinating the private universities and community to work effectively at addressing a prevailing need.

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The current emphasis on universities as contributors towards economic growth has shifted the university-community engagement onto a new path. As Tun Mahathir points out, community engagement in its essence should not only see the economic role played by universities in response to the demands made by the community. Having such a perspective on engagement does not address other equally pressing needs of society such as character building. Instead, the university must know the full agenda set forth by the community. Knowing this agenda enables the university to maintain its relevance to the society in the face of many changes. The university must combine researched knowledge with society's development in mind to create a comprehensive education aligned with change.