

## Public Policy and USM: An Approach to Fit a Renewed Sense of Public Purpose

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### ABSTRACT

*Malaysian Higher educational reform is an important and central aspect of the broader Malaysian public policy focus on excellence, development and national growth. This proposed paper intends to discuss analyze and critique the APEX program for Malaysian Universities. In particular the paper will investigate and discuss the way Universiti Sains Malaysia has interpreted and developed its strategic goals in light of its award of APEX status. Specifically I intend to discuss the strengths and limitations of the Universiti Sains Malaysia agenda, and contextualize it within a broader discussion about the directions of Malaysian Higher Education, in conditions of globalization, network society, and the knowledge economy.*

*The challenges faced by the reform agenda at USM are significant and it is important that any understanding of the USM agenda be informed by deep reflection on the underlying philosophical aims and justifications for its direction. In this way my paper will attempt to show how the USM project is both an important part of Malaysian national development and a critical response to contemporary globalization, while at the same time an innovative and challenging intervention into public policy debate in Higher Education. The values and objectives of USM in regards to its strategic reorientation have implications far beyond the Higher Education sector and these implications will also be discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Values, Higher Education, APEX, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Philosophy, Sustainability*

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## **Introduction**

Malaysian public policy faces important and ongoing issues which need addressing. The problems of a middle economy trap, environmental degradation and a culture increasingly challenged by global forces pose significant challenges for Malaysian public policy and manifest as challenges for the role of higher education. This paper will provide an introductory discussion of one reform in higher education known as APEX (2007; Education, 2007, p. 7). The APEX strategy is itself modeled on the German universities excellence initiative and is part of the strategic aims of the National Higher Education Action Plan (NHEAP) 2007-2010. Given the economic and cultural challenges facing Malaysia, the tensions between tradition and modernization and the need to move into a knowledge economy while at the same time sustain national culture and values and environment, the APEX program stands as an effort to 'think outside the box' to address these issues. According to the MOHE, 'An important approach towards achieving world-class status is the establishment of one or two Apex Universities. An Apex University is a conceptual construct that in due time will stand atop the pyramid of institutions. The Apex Universities will be the nation's centre's of academic distinction' (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007, p. 34).

APEX as a strategy for higher education exists within the broader economic context of Malaysia's development. This context is characterized by the middle income trap which characterizes Malaysia's position in the global economy. Noore Alam Siddiquee argues that the problems of the Malaysian public sector characterized by 'large bureaucracies, high operational budgets and huge deficits' (Siddiquee, 2006, p. 342) is now compounded by precipitous falls in direct foreign investment. Faced with a need to liberalize the economy and cut public sector spending and inefficient waste and at the same time maintain a sense of cultural and economic independence Malaysian public policy faces important developmental issues. According to, Noore Alam Siddiquee:

'The nation is already faced with a plethora of complex problems: narrow base of its exports, limited local market, growing protectionism, deteriorating balance of payment situation and internal savings, stagnancy in the capital market and the weakening of local currency. All these developments have had

serious implications for not only the nation's economic policies and programs but also for its governance in general' (Siddiquee, 2006, p. 343).

Reform to higher education in Malaysia must be seen at least in part against this backdrop. On the one hand a need to develop the economy and escape the trap of middle income and possible stagnation that many fear and on the other hand a desire to maintain national culture and values against the backdrop of westernization and Americanization. This pressure manifests through the authority of global institutions. Consider for example the opinions of the World Bank:

'Malaysia's sustained competitive edge is not guaranteed. As with many developing countries entering the global economy, Malaysia will need to transform itself into an innovative economy in which competitiveness is no longer based primarily on mass production, low cost manufacturing efficiency, relatively unskilled labor, and low wages to continue to prosper in the decades ahead. ... Making this transition will require improving the overall effectiveness of the university and national innovation systems. This will involve much more than improving only the functioning of the university system, even though the university system is clearly one of the most critical elements that must be upgraded' (World Bank, 2007, p. xiii).

## **Higher Educational Reform**

The critical aim of the Ministry of Higher Education is that at least one APEX university should be in the top 100 of global rankings by 2010. Such an aim given the current status in contemporary rankings is a difficult (if not impossible) challenge. It is made even more difficult by the fact that there are several global rankings including the Times Higher Education Supplement rankings (THES) and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University rankings (SJTU) (Marginson, 2007). There is an implicit tension in the aims of Apex that manifests quite clearly. An example of this tension is articulated by the then Deputy Higher Education Minister Dr Hou Kok Chung in 2008. He argued in response to questions in the Malaysian Dewan Rakyat that, "The ranking made by several agencies in the country and abroad is not important, but the ministry is still concern because it is a point of reference although it need not be that we have to follow a

particular system”, (Bernama, 2008). Following on from this the then Deputy Minister was alleged to have said that, ‘the ministry would review USM’s selection for the programme if its position in the THES-QS World University Rankings did not improve within the stipulated period’ (Bernama, 2008).

Rankings appear to be important in the court of public opinion yet informed scholars criticize them as flawed. Rising up the current rankings especially the THES appears *superficially in the public eye* to be an aim of APEX and yet there is a recognition among policy makers that APEX is about ‘business unusual’ and that merely attempting to mimic or follow the current trends is neither suitable in the Malaysian context or necessarily conducive to national goals. This issue is a critical issue for Malaysian public policy since the aims of a public policy mesmerized by rankings stand in sharp contrast to one which is critical of the current rankings system. The pressures of isomorphism in higher education are significant and apparently relentless. The pressures of status anxiety which rankings tables fuel and feed off are a constant pressure on policy makers. The tension between the need to satisfy public demand for success against externally imposed rankings data and the desire to advance Malaysian interests manifests in the way Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) addresses the public issue of rankings. USM is specifically not trying to tailor its approach and policies to suit rankings, certainly not rankings as currently constituted by the THES.

## **Philosophy and Public Policy**

The philosophical direction that USM is articulating and espousing in regards to higher education stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary neo-liberal discourse of higher education, competitive globalization and human capital formation (Comaroff, 2001; Giroux, 2002). The philosophy and outlook of USM and its commitment to sustainability and ‘the bottom billions’ is part of a deeper philosophical approach to the problems of higher education in Malaysia. In this sense APEX ultimately is about leadership and the moral politics of cultural self respect. Recognizing that a key concern for Malaysian development is balancing modernization with cultural recognition and respect is a key way for Malaysian reformers to grapple with the problems of globalization and identity in a changing higher educational environment. Reconfiguring power and identity in an increasingly globalised environment is a central issue for reform (Furlow,

2009). Tan Sri Dzulkipli Abdul Razak captures the sentiment in the following quote: ‘Why do we not define for ourselves what success is all about in the context of our own civilization? What’s important to me is to recognize that we have our own civilization ... We’ve got our own set of values’ (Ismail, 2008).

To grasp the USM project we must think with it and understand it not in simplistic or reductive categories but view it as a deeper discourse over the direction of education, higher education and identity in Malaysia. The significance of the aims of USM given the discussion above on rankings (a key disciplinary resource of neo-liberal imperialism) cannot be dismissed lightly. The USM agenda, outlined in its commitment to sustainability and its university in a garden philosophy seeks to engage arguably the greatest challenge facing human kind in contemporary times (USM, 2010). Articulated through the discourse of sustainability and commitment to the bottom billions, the USM project engages a deeper philosophical issue which informs and drives the approaches to sustainability, social justice and learning (Collier, 2007). This approach is less concerned with where the university ranks on a scale to what it is doing to genuinely help those in need and address the major problems of our time.

Philosophically the approach or problematic that USM is engaging in can be articulated as the current tension between the desire to attain material prosperity (and the subordination of higher education to an increasingly individualistic and consumerist interpretation of this) (2002) and the desire to renew and sustain our spiritual and civilizational resources and values (and yet advance material prosperity in a more sustainable way). Sustainability must be understood within this deeper framework as more than just conservation and more as part of a dialogue about values and what truly counts. Yet the desire of USM to engage and articulate a mission according to criteria it deems as important requires at root an understanding that current higher educational discourse and its basis in contemporary modernity needs to be challenged and debated.

Contemporary Malaysian society is now buffeted by global popular culture, consumerism and growing individualism (Ravitch and Viteritti, 2003; Razak, Azman et al., 2008). Cultural values of care and respect and compassion are increasingly under threat by values of possessive individualism. Challenging this values shift and reestablishing the values agenda of Malaysian higher education is a critical aim within the USM strategy. In rearticulating the values mission of the university the USM

project draws indirectly upon the contemporary Malaysian influences of Islam and other religious traditions that prevail in Malaysia (Hamid, 2000; Hamid, 2007). This influence of a deeper commitment to ‘intangible’ values drawn from both secular and non secular sources is critical to understand if we want to grasp the deep moral wellsprings that inform the USM approach to APEX (Razak, 2010). This commitment to deeper sacred values is also part of the discourse of Malaysian public policy which also recognizes the importance of the spiritual and values dimension in higher education and broader public policy. According to the MOHE:

‘Malaysia urgently requires a transformation in higher education. These changes will require the successful translation of long-range strategic plans into closely coordinated actions. The future economic, social, and spiritual well-being of our nation depends critically on the success of this transformation’ (Education, 2007, p. 7).

In short the necessity of public policy and higher educational institutions being informed by a deeper value is not a novel notion but one rooted in Malaysian public policy itself. Given this how does USM address the fact that a, ‘striking characteristic of global higher education today is the reluctance to articulate and address the purpose and meaning of tertiary education’ (Razak, 2009). As asserted above one of the most salient characteristics of Malaysian public policy and public philosophy is the connection of public policy to the achievement of social values and normative commitments. A critical issue for Malaysia is the tension between Malaysia’s economic development in the contemporary globalised world and its commitment to protecting its civilization and spiritual values.

In other words the current policy initiatives aimed at economic advancement and rising out of the middle income trap are within the contemporary neo-liberal global environment placing extreme stress upon the maintenance and articulation of Malaysian values and culture. For example the current language debate over English and its place in Malaysian schools, clearly articulated the tensions between protecting culture and development (Campbell, 2009; Campbell, 2010). Debate over the influence of ICT and social networking sites such as Face Book and Twitter are another example of the tension between forms of globalised development and the place and centrality of local culture. Debate over socially just economic policies is now in tension with the desire to liberalize the economy and maintain competitive advantage. Finally, debates over

rankings and where Malaysian higher education stands against isomorphic pressure contrasts with the desire to set a Malaysian course for higher education informed by and resonant with cultural values (Campbell, 2010).

## Values and the Spiritual Foundation of the University in a Garden

The ‘spiritual’ and sacred dimension that informs the USM philosophy is at odds with the way contemporary consumer culture manifests in Malaysia has a religious basis. In *principle* this spiritual dimension is not necessarily reducible to religious belief although in *practice* religious belief is certainly a very important influence and source of such attitudes (Cahill, 2003). The spiritual is related to our capacity as human beings to flourish, to pursue goals higher and deeper than simple possession of material goods and to sustain human relationships that are based on measure, respect and reciprocity (Armstrong, 2009, p. 74). John Armstrong makes the point sagaciously, he argues that the term spiritual refers to, ‘the whole of a person’s inner life – it is intended to get away from talking only about individual’s intellectual abilities: their degrees of cleverness or the extent of their knowledge. It includes how things go emotionally, what sort of attitudes they have, the character of their imagination and memory.’ (Armstrong, 2009, p. 164). In other words the spiritual resources of a person or of a culture refer to the intangible values and characteristics that inform a person’s way of being in the world. Often found in religious belief but not necessarily reducible to it, the spiritual dimensions of a civilization relates to what Sorokin refers to as the ‘ideational’ or inner values which are now being eroded by ‘sensate’ or external values (Sorokin, 1950). The commitment to values and the ‘intangibles’ make up what Sorokin refers to as ideational culture and what Armstrong cites as ‘spiritual’ culture. In Malaysia these values manifest as the deep respectful and reflective attitudes drawn from religious spirituality which are the basis for sustainability and a balance life. The need to engage deeper values for the mission of higher education is captured in the following:

‘Increasingly, ethical question are becoming just as important – previously one could do science without placing much emphasis on ethics (which explains several current environmental problems), especially in developing countries. This is no longer

true today, and the same applies to the question of morality. We need to pay particular attention to other non-scientific disciplines, which requires the expertise of several different groups of people, i.e., the social scientists and those in the humanities who can offer guidance as to what is possible and not possible and what transcends human dignity and rights.’ (Razak, 2009, p. 3)

Education exists (at least in theory) not simply to enable us to pursue material comfort. An educated person is someone who appreciates beauty, is restrained in their desires; in short education should aim to inculcate the best in us as human beings and not simply the basest (Dewey, 1916). Education is in its essence aimed at articulating, defending and developing civilization and civilized behaviors. Such a view may seem uncontroversial to many yet the way education and in our example higher education is developing in the contemporary world is increasingly at odds with our spiritual aspect (substantively understood). The question that animates USM’s philosophy is how can we take seriously the need to cultivate the ‘high quality relationship to ideas, objects and other people’ that is the basis for how we exercise our freedom and maintain our dignity? Education is in many respects a project aimed at increasing our self awareness and sensitivity to others (Bruner, 1996). When we take a close look at the project of sustainability and the commitment to the bottom billions which are the key commitments of USM we see in these commitments a commitment to a view of education that connects human flourishing and attainment to a deeper and more sustained basis than simply the pursuit of private pleasure or consumption.

While informed by religion the university in a garden project it is not necessarily dependent upon it. Another way of saying this is to say that religious belief (for example Islam) is an important informant to the values and ethics that underpin and inform the university in a garden project. However, one does not have to share the religiously informed values to agree on the substantive ethical project. This is so despite the fact that the university in a garden philosophy is an excellent example of how spiritual values can inform public policy in a substantive and open ended fashion. In this sense the USM project derives much of its hidden strength from sacred values, in Durkheim’s sense of the term, and its desire to reassert this sacredness against the profane tendencies of neo-liberal culture. At the same time the USM project also possesses an overlapping consensual capacity to speak to those who may not share specific religious foundations. This is important for several



reasons. Firstly it means that those who hold secular or non-Islamic normative philosophies can still find points of agreement with a philosophy that is architectonically informed by Islam (but whose legitimacy can be sustained despite its founding influences), thus breaking down barriers and misrepresentations. Secondly the philosophy of USM provides a substantive and lived example of culturally inspired values that shows by example and not by dictate. In short the philosophy of sustainability provides a normative bridge between diverse publics and also provides a *substantive* articulation of cultural and religious values.

The meaning of universities, what they do and the extent to which they help develop our deeper and nobler characteristics or dismiss them as merely ‘unmeasurable’ is a key aspect of the debate over university role and function. In this sense the essential philosophical problem that USM seeks to address through its commitment to sustainability, bottom billions and engaging creativity and innovation is the problem of engaging creativity, innovation and change in the context of commitments to human flourishing, dignity and ultimately civilization. USM’s project in this sense does not sit easily with ‘rankings’ as currently construed (Campbell, 2010; Campbell, 2010). The critical tension that animates USM’s approach to educational reform is tying together three essential issues. How to define the mission of USM in a way that is relevant to Malaysia’s actual national cultural, economic and developmental aspirations in the context of globalization; how to unleash human capacity and creativity in the service of these aspirations properly understood; and finally, how to develop and educational mission that is attenuated to the need to maintain civilizational respect and dignity (Campbell, 2009; Campbell, 2010; Campbell, 2010).

USM’s strategy attempts to engage all of these. The engagement with developmental aspirations is critical to the USM approach. Sometimes dismissed as idealistic or unrealistic this essential strategy of USM in response to globalization is in fact an astute effort at engaging the contradictions and tensions inherent in contemporary globalization (Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Held and McGrew, 2000; Alderman, 2001) and the pressure this places on Malaysian development and culture.

## **Sustainability as Civilizing Education**

Sustainability as a concept is closely informed by its relationship to its civilizing mission. In other words sustainability garners its moral legitimacy

form its contribution to ensuring that the highest and most developed attributes of our commonly experienced civilization are enhanced, protected and developed. Sustainability is in this sense not the mere protection of existing cultural and environmental conditions but rather and in many respects more importantly it involves the articulation and development of capacities and capabilities on a broader and deeper scale than hitherto attained under neo-liberalism. In the Malaysian context this mission manifests as a desire to both protect and develop Malaysian culture and civilization as well as to engage with a broader and wider network of interlocutors in the articulation of commonly held ideals. Hence the project of USM and its university in a garden sustainability mission is deeply educational and concerned with the proper and balanced product that a valid and defensible education produces.

Are students able to articulate their desires and wants within a framework informed by mutuality reflection and self respect? Are students able to exercise restraint in their desires for the common good? Are they able to balance their interests and the interests of others? Are students able to recognize and respect diversity and difference in the context of maintaining self respect for their own identities? Are students educated so as to be able to sustain and maintain high quality relationships with their peers? In the Malaysian context a search for a way to achieve development and escape the middle income trap as well as maintain national dignity and respect is the central role of higher education. The concept of sustainability provides a thematic framing of its philosophical direction and road to reform. According to USM;

‘USM has strategized as a potential APEX university to enmesh itself in the challenges to solve global issues with the hope to make a lasting difference at all levels. In this regard, USM has chosen sustainability as a platform to create a new future. The term denotes an over-arching concept of meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”.’ (USM, 2008, p. iii)

The strengths of USM’s strategy are many and varied. Among the main attributes of USM’s approach is recognition that the way the current completion framework is functioning works against achieving effective and realistic outcomes for Malaysian higher education. In other words competition in a global environment is ‘stacked against’ institutions in developing nations in ways that preclude success defined in contemporary global terms. What does this mean? It means in short

that on the whole universities such as USM are in an unfair and unsustainable situation if they see their mission as competing against Harvard or Oxford or the Sorbonne. Instead USM aims to ask a simple question: what ought we to do as a higher educational institution that achieves our goals and is driven by our values?

The simplicity of this issue, to ask what a university in Malaysia should do that is relevant to its position its national goals and its international relationships belies the difficulty and intellectual challenge ahead. Why is the articulation of an answer to this apparently simple question so hard? It is hard because USM exists in a local regional and global environment which is dominated and informed by neo-liberal forms of isomorphic forces which push universities in Malaysia to mimic practices and values which are not necessarily in the national interest (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This isomorphic pressure reduces the aims of higher education to instrumental and measurable outputs stripped of the normative values that are so important to many Malaysians.

For example the push toward performance measurement in universities which is part of the rationalizing process of neo-liberal capitalism (and driven by a desire to improve in the global rankings) does not necessarily take into account the value orientation of universities. In other words, the desire to measure the success or failure of a university, when measured against key performance indicators (which are the *sin qua non* of the new managerialism and performance culture in the higher education sector) does not necessarily take consideration of the values orientation of universities. In an environment where values are increasingly marginalized and key performance criteria are taken as goods in themselves, the intangible values (what I referred to previously as spiritual and civilizational) that substantively inform the deeper quality of a universities mission are occluded.

The USM strategy seeks to reestablish these 'intangible' values into the aims and objectives of USM. In other words USM recognizes that, 'efficiency, effectiveness and productivity alone as conventionally understood and interpreted are no longer sufficient in determining the success of transforming higher education for a sustainable tomorrow.' (USM, 2008, p. 62) Such recognition of the values dimension of Malaysian higher education is a practical response to the challenges that beset higher education. It is practical because a contemporary education that does not address values and the normative and deeper meaning of education is not educational in the proper sense of the term. In this sense Malaysian public policy and its support for the direction USM is taking is

an example not of ungrounded idealism, but rather an effort to engage meaning and substantive depth in a society beset by change, commercialized culture and consumerism.

## **Concluding Thoughts on Leadership**

Bill Readings in his seminal analysis of the 'ruin' of universities argues that there has been a decline in the power of the university in the public sphere and a decline in the authority of intellectuals in the public sphere. According to Readings the university is in 'ruins' (Readings, 1995). The phenomenon which Readings analyses in the Anglo-American universities is largely a result of the cultural shifts fuelled by neo-liberalism and the breakdown of national cultures under the gaze and drives of globalization. If Readings is correct and the leadership role that intellectuals and universities play in society is dissipated how this does affect our analysis of the USM strategy? Is it possible as a matter of public policy to lead against the force of contemporary neo-liberal globalization? While USM faces similar problems with respect to the leadership role that intellectuals can play in Malaysian society and the leadership of Malaysian universities, it would be erroneous to conclude that in the Malaysian context the importance of the 'guru' and of the intellectual and moral leadership has dissipated to the extent that it has in the west. This provides an important support for the USM strategy.

The argument of people such as Bill Readings and William Tierney is that the place of national culture and the modernist presuppositions that support it have dissipated under contemporary post modern conditions (Tierney, 2001). Such an argument must be attenuated in the Malaysian context. First, it is important to recognize that while the pressures of neo-liberal competitiveness are indeed pervasive in the Malaysian higher educational scene the distinctive role of Malaysian universities and role of intellectuals and their leadership still needs to be included in any analysis. In the Malaysian example we must take into account the distinctively 'Malaysian' approach to leadership. Ibrahim Bajunid points out that, in Malay society the teacher has historically had an esteemed position (Bajunid, 2007; Bajunid, 2008).

Part of the USM project is an effort to reassert the leadership role that public universities and intellectuals play in Malaysian society in conditions where this role is being challenged. This strategy finds support

in the Malaysian cultural respect for moral and intellectual leadership. The framework of sustainability provides a renewed sense of intellectual and moral leadership and purpose to Malaysian universities in conditions of globalization. USM's project is both compatible with reframing the educational mission in a way that is showing leadership in both traditional and modern ways. The ideology of sustainability and commitment to the bottom billions provides USM with a terrain of moral leadership that is both relevant to Malaysian development, culture and spiritual aspirations but also connects to broader threads within globalization. Such a strategy provides USM, at least in principle with an overarching legitimating principle which can be used both to engage globalization in an alternative way to the neo liberal agenda. In this sense the university in a garden APEX agenda is an example of educational leadership interested in substantive issues of moral and cultural accountability and not simply where they lie on a rankings table.

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