The Role of the University: Malaysian Students' Perceptions

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Abstract—**The role of the university has become increasingly important in meeting individuals' needs and in determining the wealth of a country. However, there have been some fervent debates in western countries on the role of the university. This paper aims to discuss the different perceptions of university students in Malaysia on the roles played by the university. Qualitative and quantitative methods are employed in the collection of data. Sets of questionnaires were distributed to undergraduates from different universities in Malaysia.**

The findings have shown that most of the current undergraduates in Malaysian universities tend to have positive perspective on the roles of the university. The major role of the university in the perception of the undergraduate is to keep themselves abreast of the latest development in information and knowledge. Besides, the role of the university is perceived as preparing students for their future careers and promoting a dignified and civilized society. This study has also discovered some students' aspirations about the role of higher education. Those aspirations will be argued against the backdrop of the Malaysian context.

Keywords – Role of the universities, students' perception on the role of universities, universities in Malaysia.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Roles of the Univrersities

The European tradition of higher education focuses on the two main roles of research and teaching as identified by Humboldt (1810) [1]. In Markwell's [2] term, 'research' is for the furtherance of knowledge as well as the teaching and conservation of knowledge. Humboldt continued to stress the search for new knowledge through research. Forty years later Newman [3] wrote about the idea of a University, he elaborated on the idea of the role of universities encouraging, "collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge". The collision of mind with mind and knowledge with knowledge give a picture of fervent debates and even possible arguments among intellectuals. The university is thus a place for free expression, embracing differences, a place for experiment, trial and error. It is in the collision of minds that endless possibilities of new knowledge can be discovered. Thus the role of the university does not delineate only the functions of university, but also depict how those functions can be achieved. In Humboldt's and Newman's terms, it is the atmosphere of openness, humility of listening to other subjects of investigation, the "living voice" [1].

To cope with globalization and the rapid changes in the new world, the European Union expanded its definition of university roles. The concept of innovation has been added whereby universities are encouraged to exploit "the knowledge triangle of research, education, and innovation" [1]. Florida and his associates [4] described the university's role in the creative economy through the lens of the "3T"s, namely technology, talent and tolerance. Hence, universities are inevitably linked to the innovation potential of nations [5]. Therefore, the roles of the university have been changed rapidly from a teaching centre for the generation and preservation of knowledge, to a corporate entity which acts as an economic and innovative institution.

B. Educational Development in Malaysia

The Malaysian National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2007-2010) asserts that institutions of higher learning must transform and play the important role of supplying "human capital" for the country [6]. The Ministry of Higher Education oversees all 20 public universities, 21 polytechnics, 37 community colleges, 32 private universities and university colleges, four branch campuses of foreign universities and 485 private colleges in Malaysia [6]. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2007-2010) states that the government aims to produce 21,000 Ph.D. holders by 2010, 100,000 Ph.D. holders in 15 years in the areas of science, technology and medicine (60%), humanities and applied literature (20%) and other professional fields (20%). The concern is not so much the number of graduates in Malaysia but that of persistent graduate unemployment problem since the 1990s [7]. Sulaiman and Burke [8], having studied the unemployed graduates in Malaysia, assert that as well as knowledge "good soft skills, problem-solving skills and employable value-added skills" are essential for Malaysian graduates to secure good jobs.

The Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities stated in its policy that the association will strive to make higher education in Malaysia affordable "while helping the Government reduce the outflow of funds for education overseas" [9]. This is proven in the numerous branches of foreign universities which have set up their campuses in Malaysia. They are Monash University, University of Nottingham, Curtin University of Technology and Swinburne University of Technology. Furthermore, many local institutions also offer foreign undergraduate and

postgraduate degrees. Therefore, it is undeniable that the roles of universities in Malaysia are not limited to meeting the market demands for education but also to make contributions to the country's economy.

With this mass production of university graduates, what is the university experience for the Malaysian university students? What are their perceptions about the role of universities? Are their dreams being fulfilled and how do they view the role of the university in benefiting themselves and society as a whole?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approach. The data presented in this study is the qualitative part of a larger research project. A survey was carried out at 10 universities in Malaysia and 485 students volunteered to answer the questionnaire. The locations of the universities are from six states in Malaysia - Penang, Kedah, Perak, Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Sabah. The questionnaire consisted of both structured and open-ended questions. There were three researchers involved in the data collection and data analysis process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth qualitative data from 20 volunteer respondents. Each interview session lasted from half an hour to one and a half hours. Frequency count and thematic approach were used to analyze the open-ended questions. All the interview sessions were tape- recorded with the permission from the respondents and were transcribed and analyzed using constant comparison approach, an adapted grounded theory approach developed by Strauss & Corbin [10]. Respondents were informed of their right and were assured that materials made public would not reveal their personal identity.

The sampling involved a total of 485 students from 10 universities in Malaysia. There was a good balance of different ethnicity which included Chinese, Malay and Indian. The ages of students were from 19 to 22 years old; 480 students were doing a degree programme, 5 students were doing a Masters programme; female (54.84%, n=266) male (45.16%, n=219). The three tables below show the different faculties from both the public and private universities.

TABLE I.   PARTICIPANTS

Total number of participants			
Type of university	Frequency		Percentage
Public Universities	M	75	15.46%
	F	110	22.68%
Private Universities	M	144	29.69%
	F	156	32.16%

TABLE II.   FACULTIES   FROM   PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Business & Finance*	51	27.57%

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Science	37	20.00%
Social Science	12	6.49%
School of Medicine**	8	4.32%
Engineering & Technology***	54	29.19%
Others****	23	12.43%
Total	185	100%

TABLE III.   FACULTIES   FROM   PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Business & Finance*	37	12.33%
Science	30	10.00%
Social Science	109	36.33%
School of Medicine**	59	19.67%
Engineering & Technology***	5	1.67%
Creative Arts	60	20.00
Total	300	100%

Note: * Including Marketing, Accounting and Economics
   ** Including Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy
   *** Including Faculty of ICT
   **** Including Education, Environment science and Industrial Statistics

III. FINDINGS

A. Role of the University in Meeting My Needs

The answers of the respondents were grouped under several categories:

TABLE IV.   UNIVERSITY MEETS MY NEEDS

Needs	Frequency	Percentage
Knowledge	312	61.66%
Social Needs	76	15.02%
Doesn't meet/ Negative comments	6	1.19%
Uncertainty/ Don't know	114	22.53%
Total	508	100% (+/-)

Most students (61.66%, n=312) wrote that the university fulfils their educational needs. The descriptive answers include the following: (a) acquiring knowledge to be a professional; (b) gaining knowledge in their field of study, and (c) learning about how to do research.

About 15% of the students (n=76) mentioned learning social skills which include: (a) making friends; (b) working

with each other, and (c) connecting with others. They mentioned that the university serves as a place to develop the following skills: (a) communication; (b) problem-solving; (c) conflict resolution, and (d) critical thinking.

There were quite a number of students (22.53%, n=114) who were unsure or answered "I don't know" as to how they could gain benefits from a university education. It could be a worrying sign as students were not sure about the purpose of education. Haji Shamsuddin [11] identified that there were unmatched expectations between the employers and local graduates. Perhaps this group of students was not motivated to take initiatives or they are not informed about the career prospects of their courses.

B. Role of the University in Promoting a Better Society

There were some repeated themes emerging from the data. The various themes were grouped and displayed in the table below:

TABLE V.   THE UNIVERSITY MAKES CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIETY

Contribution	Frequency	Percentage
Provide a knowledgeable society	113	23.25%
Provide interaction/ relational aspect	138	28.39%
Build a civilized society	86	17.69%
Doesn't contribute / Negative comments	11	2.26%
Uncertainty/ Don't know	138	28.39%
Total	486	100% (+/-)

More than a quarter of the students (28.39%, n=138) mentioned the relational dimensions of university education whereby the university serves as a small society, providing them with many interactions and learning opportunities. Some of the sub-groups under this category are: (a) learning how to work with different students in assignment groups; (b) interacting with different students from different backgrounds, and (c) building long lasting friendships.

Close to a quarter of the students (23.25%, n=113) mentioned that the contributions of the university to society are (a) educating the citizens; (b) training future leaders; (c) producing more professionals, and (d) improving social capital for the country.

There were 86 students (17.69%) who wrote about the cultural aspects, which include (a) educating the staffs and students about humanity by doing charity, fund-raising; (b) encouraging communication; (c) promoting understanding among different races so that there will be respect among people; (d) building a civilized society with a low crime rate and high moral standards, and (e) reducing political issues. Students aspire to have a civilized society when most of the citizens are well-educated, able to care about and understand one another.

However, there were more than 30% of students who either give negative comments or were unsure about how university education can contribute to a better society (30.65%, n=149). It could be an indication that students were not comfortable in presenting their views as this question relates to a broader society.

The above findings are further echoed by the respondents during interview sessions. There were three over-arching themes (from Sections C to E) that emerged from the data collected from the in-depth interviews.

C. Knowledge & Future Career

Students normally relate their university education with future career.

"I am here for a better life in the future, in terms of salary and job choice. What else can I do after high school? I can choose to repair air-conditioners. But I don't have any skills to repair anything. I don't want to do a skill-based job like my parents. I attend university in the hope of holding at least a professional job in the future." (Male, private university, Business course, Year 1)

"The university helps to specify our goals and specializations like medicine or biotechnology. In my case, it is psychology." (Female, private university, Psychology & Counselling course, Year 3)

D. Interpersonal & Social Skills

From a life-span development perspective, university students are in their early adulthood stage where the development of interpersonal skill is crucial. According to Haji Shamsuddin [11], the mismatch and lacking of skills are the two main problems faced by today's university students. As such, the government has ended up heavily investing in graduate retraining schemes, solving the problems faced by unemployed graduates.

"The university is very competitive…it is the first time I left home and the first time I learnt that people are jealous if I performed well and I had struggled coping with uncooperative group members. There were students who never contributed to the group assignments but they managed to get by. I thought it was unfair, but I cannot tell the lecturers because they were my friends. So l learnt that the society is much more complicated than I had earlier thought and the 'bigger' society will be like that." (Female, public university, Accounting course, Year 4)

E. Development of a Civlized Society

Galbraith et al [12] contended that the role of the university has moved away from the ideals of cultural formation as the result of economic development. However, many students mentioned the issue of cultural formation in their interview.

"The university trains up citizens to have a good attitude towards life, good manners, behave less violently, more knowledgeably, more professionally; and the society will be more civilized" (Female, public university, MBA Course, Year 1).

"I had never used chopsticks before because I am an Indian. I had fun learning how to use chopsticks from my

Chinese friend. ...there are such mixtures of people in the university; differences in religion become more acceptable for the society. Students of different culture interact with one another and we learn to understand their values without much prejudice as our parents might have taught us" (Female, private university, Social Science, Year 3).

"With more students attending university, there will be less crime and higher standard of moral....the society will be better." (Female, public university, MBA)

F. Students' Aspirations

However, there were some heart-pouring moments. A student lamented the theoretical approach and low standard of education received.

"I do not think the university prepared me well for the job market. After graduating from a Multimedia course in a public university, I had worked in a company. I found out that the course I studied before was too theoretical and my employer put me on probation training for half a year. I was not able to do the job. So, I ended up doing another Master degree now" (Male, now doing an MBA course in another public university).

"Previously I did a degree in Physics. I have tried writing articles and the feedback I got from various journal editors was, 'your points are there, but your English needs improvement'. My friends from Chemistry, and Bio-Chemistry departments and other courses in the Science Faculty also told me the same thing. The overseas examiners had always made comments during their viva that 'since Malaysia is a developing country, it is okay, but actually the standard is not quite there'. I was really upset about those comments." (Male, public university, Cryptography, PhD programme)

While some students were hesitant about sharing sensitive issues, they harboured a hope for a more open and multi-dimensional system. They yearned for a system that "embraces multicultural values since Malaysia is a multicultural society. I found that only a limited and uni-dimensional perspective was taught in my first year of university." (Female, public university, Home Science Education Course, Year 3) The "uni-dimensional" and "limited perspective" referred to the compulsory Tamadun Islam (Islamic Civilization) course for public and private university students.
"The university doesn't only create professionals; it also nurtures students in terms of culture, religion, and diversity." (Female, private university, Psychology course Year 3)

"I think there shouldn't be a quota system based on race; the opportunity for higher education should be open to all. Most of us didn't get to study our dream course so we ended up in a private university. The tuition fee here is much higher. Fortunately, my parents are supportive, or I won't have an opportunity to study" (Female, private university, Year 1)

There was one student who aspired to be able to integrate cross-disciplinary learning but the system did not allow it.

"I think the university does prepare me for a job in the future. But I do not think the university is contributing to the

society. I feel that the university is a system linked too closely to the industrial world. So the university is just a tool for the job market. Just like my IT course. Every module of course has been fixed and the system is very rigid...I had wanted to choose some cross-disciplinary courses related to Arts & Humanity such as how to combine story writing with IT skills, but there is no such flexibility. I feel like the university is a factory to rigidly produce the fixed kind of manpower for the society..." (Male, public university, Computer Science Course, Year 3)

The aspiration of students can be summarized as (a) to receive education that will equip them with a high standard of knowledge and skills to face the challenges in a working world; (b) to have a more open and neutral system that offers multi-dimensional education in terms of values and culture; and (c) to have an education that enables them to integrate well in the society.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that university students in Malaysia are very pragmatic. They are concerned about building a career, and pursuing a better life in terms of finance and quality of life. They also value the interpersonal lessons learnt as described rightly by one student, "A university is a place where people grow and mature. It is also a place where people transform their development from adolescence to adulthood. I will never forget my university experience and I will always cherish and treasure it." (Female, private university, Psychology course, Year 3)

Brown & Lauder [13] agree that education has been seen as a means of upward mobility for individuals to upgrade themselves, get better jobs and improve their quality of life. Also, Bartell [14] further claims that the role of the university has been "revolutionary" as a means for countries to increase the quality of human capital, which is the basic driving force for economies.

The interpersonal and social dimension is another overarching theme that emerged from the survey of descriptive and interview data. This relational aspect is probably an important one for an oriental society which is very community based. Livesey [15] observes that universities function as "Networks in a World of Networks."

Education is first and foremost a public asset and it is for the public good [16]. This 'public good' is not limited to the short term but also for many generations to come. The long term gain of the cultural aspect is for history to witness. Universities are now being considered as critical national assets in producing valuable human capital and this human capital is going to determine the wealth of a country. However, education should not be used solely as a tool for economic development, or a tool for nation building or any form of hegemony or totalitarianism [17]. The Malaysian educational system has evolved from a pattern of educational pluralism to one of national centralization. Therefore the educational system has been used to accomplish some national development agenda. Perhaps, the "transcendent mission" of education according to [1] is its enduring element of seeking after truth and knowledge. The respondents in this study have identified a few areas in which

education can help to build a civilized society in the context of Malaysia.

We educators acknowledge the role of the "learning subject" who is our students. The students in this study are the product of their environment. They aspire and are capable of transforming the environment. We strongly discourage the distortion of the goals of universities when they are solely valued on the basis of their contribution to economic growth, instead of the common good of humanity.

The world is fast changing. Are our students well-equipped to face the challenges of the future? Malaysia is gearing towards globalization and the building of world-class academic universities. Perhaps the habitus of a uni-dimensional purpose, which is viewed by some of the respondents in this study as hegemonic and reductionalistic in approach, needs to be changed. Another dimension, perhaps, is for our educators to think about the implementation of Liberal Arts Education, and cross-disciplinary programmes which encourage the integration of various disciplines and focuses on a more broad-based learning to achieve a deeper sense of appreciation of what is meant by living as a human being, instead of merely becoming a tool of the economy.

V. CONCLUSION

Education does not exist on its own. It has its own context. The university is always a place to discover, maintain, and transmit knowledge, and knowledge has been identified as a principal drive of growth. This paper highlights the aspirations and values held dear by a sample of Malaysian university students. It is hoped that in the process of discussing and re-defining the role of the university, universities in Malaysia will be able to better serve its stakeholders, the students, their parents and academicians, in fulfilling their dreams and in creating a better society which is culturally rich and embraces differences. Future research may be needed to further explore some of the contextual factors that give rise to perceptions of the students.

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