

**Education, Culture & Sustainable  
Development in ASEAN:  
What is the State of Affairs & What Should  
be Done?**

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# Four major issues

- 1) ASEAN -- Developing an Autonomous Social Science & Working at Higher End of Knowledge
- 2) New Corporate Culture Engulfing Universities & Its Consequences
- 3) Developed & developing culture: Do we have to choose? Should reflect on ASEAN culture & civilisation as basis.
- 4) Conclusion: Question of Sustainability

# **(1) ASEAN -- Developing an Autonomous Social Science & Working at Higher End of Knowledge**

For developing countries & former colonies like ASEAN, education system such as higher education has been inherited from former colonial countries, then revamped from time to time.

Social science as part of higher education developed both from colonial knowledge & also imported from West

- Struggle in immediate post-Independence years was how to redefine it to suit national needs: issue of Orientalism & Western centrism; the struggle to redefine in terms our own values & needs.
- Syed Hussein Alatas (1973) → “the captive mind vs. the creative mind”.

What about today? While much has changed, issues of orientation & perspectives still remain.

a) Have we really developed an autonomous & critical social science or is our social science still very much an extension of the paradigms, theories & concepts developed in the West?

b) We have contributed a lot of empirical knowledge to the overall knowledge corpus, but there has been little effort at working at the higher end of knowledge, more so theory-building. Theory-building still seems to be the 'preserve' of scholars from developed countries.

- Most of the work done on some of these countries, e.g. Malaysia has been conducted by scholars studying Malaysia, not by Malaysian scholars themselves.
    - > Between 1970-2000, only 25% of all social science publications on Malaysia originated from scholars in Malaysian universities, with proportion falling (Solvay & H-D Evers (2018)).
- This does not augur well for the **sustainability** of knowledge production in Malaysia, and most probably this applies to other ASEAN countries too.

## **(2) New Corporate Culture Engulfing Universities & Its Consequences**

- Following neoliberal globalisation since the 1980s, universities subject themselves to a new kind of on governance.
- Corporatisation of universities & new corporate culture especially since 1990s.
- A new set of rules & standards evaluation.

Example:

- In 1970s-1980s, tagline among academics: “Publish or perish”
- In current: Publish but you still perish, or don't thrive.  
WHY?
- Two developments:
- A) Ranking – universities now are forced to compete in the ranking game irrespective of whether they are ready or not.
- B) A new method of evaluation for research of publication
- Science & technology criteria are imposed upon social science.
- Scholars are demanded they publish only in certain journals. Only such publications are recognised for career advancement.

## **Consequence of this?**

- Universities are captured by a new kind of management culture – obsession with ranking, KPIs, publication in journals dictated by gate-keepers in the West. Standards & promotion defined by these gate-keepers.
- Are we ensured we get quality through this means? Not necessarily.
- Careerism vs. Idealism. For career rather than for critical scholarship & for public advocacy & social change.
- Is this phenomenon a new kind of “academic imperialism”?

This new corporate culture plaguing universities is disempowering & not sustainable

**For Sustainable Development to be realised, we need to: (a) reclaim the culture of critical discourse in universities; education system & university culture as enablers & empowering;**

**(b) have thought leaders & public intellectuals who can free themselves from such intellectual fetters, & provide inputs for our own advancement & societal needs, & not to please ranking agencies.**

### (3) “Developed Culture” & “Developing Culture” – Do We have to Choose?

1. These two concepts are actually problematic categories. Who defines ‘developed’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘developing’ & ‘developed’?
  2. Are they defined by the “gate-keepers” in developed countries? The experts & fly-by-night consultants?
  3. Whose culture is ‘developed’, & whose culture is ‘developing’?
- This is the problem of the “**Power of words**”. There is POWER (political, ideological) behind those labels.
  - We cannot & shouldn’t simply accept definitions & labels that, in essence, belittle our own culture & civilization.

I would rather approach the problem differently, and pose the following questions:

1: For our purposes, what kind of culture is suitable:

- (a) To ensure education is more inclusive & able to reduce the gaps between different classes, ethnic & religious groups, gender, region etc.?
- (b) To ensure the education system does not become a 'great training robbery', resulting in 'lost generations'? To ensure education becomes a 'key' to open their future, not to close it?;
- (c) To enable quality education – a system that enhances individual talents, promotes an enabling environment & critical mind?

# ASEAN & sustainability

What should we do in our effort to improve ASEAN education achievements & ensure sustainability?

Appreciate ASEAN history & civilisation – use them to build the present for the future.

- a) ASEAN societies – a mosaic of cultures – diversities; pluralistic, open, acceptance of the other
- b) Nusantara nations – a great maritime history – part of Oriental classical globalisation.
- c) ASEAN: A confluence of world's great civilisations – Islam; Buddhism; Hinduism; Confucianism; Christianity (Western).

# **(4) Conclusion: Question of Sustainability**

**Question of Sustainable Development – Sustainability:**

**TWO ISSUES:**

**First:**

**For our education system, we choose not “developed” or “developing culture”, nor corporate culture that is disempowering. Instead, we should be guided by a culture of critical discourse, inquiry and collegiality; promote critical and independent-minded scholarship, uphold academic excellence & integrity.**

- **University needs to reclaim its ideals and culture of critical discourse; inquiry; respect for knowledge, including indigenous knowledge**
- **We choose our own culture & civilisation as foundational; make our history & culture serve the present for the future. But we must make sure what we choose is inclusive, progressive, & can serve as the basis or foundation to build the future.**
- **We selectively search for & transmit knowledges of various fields in accordance with our needs & national aspirations.**

## **Second:**

- Ranking & platform for knowledge sharing & dissemination are fine if they help to empower ourselves.
- But if we follow these rigidly, we'll only disempower ourselves.
- We should discuss these more seriously & seek to cooperate internationally with like-minded institutions, organisations, and individual scholars to empower our universities to excel, and free ourselves from unnecessary fetters of control.

THANK YOU