

FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL VIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to delve into the dysfunctions of our higher education industry and trigger higher institutions to go back to the basics and consolidate the four pillars of learning advocated by UNESCO - learning to do, learning to know, learning to be and learning to live together – in order to allow for the advancement of academia and socio-behavioural development as an integral part of the core curriculum. Higher education has produced quality workforce for nations including Malaysia whose higher education provides Malaysians with the platform to strive and acquire as much knowledge as possible to keep up with the ever-changing environment and requirements of industry players. The establishment of the nation’s National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) has also complemented the aforementioned achievement by giving out loans in order to provide equal opportunities for students who wish to pursue studies at tertiary education, hence, the contribution to the education of a critical mass of bureaucrats, technocrats, managers and professionals in various fields. Higher education has also educated and trained foreign students in a wide range of fields of human knowledge and these graduates have contributed to the development or reconstruction of their respective societies and nations. On the other hand, the dysfunctional views of higher education has criticized that as a system, higher education allocates power and money to those who are considered the most “fit” and credible according to socially established standards, as a result contributing to the widening of social class differences and the narrowing of prospective opportunities. Having higher education credentials and career experience have indeed helped individuals advance economically and professionally into larger salary brackets, assimilate into higher class cultures, and increase their cultural capital or political influence but those who are unable to obtain access to higher education will experience a disadvantage in each of these realms.*

Students’ motivations for attending universities and colleges from primarily seeking to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” to being “very well off financially” at the conclusion of their higher education. By determining who is best by the academic standards of an institution, higher education has also stratified those who succeed within the structures of a university and those who do not or never make it there. Therefore, higher education as a resource from which individuals can access merit, social mobility, and ultimately power, has heighten class mobility for some and stunt it for others. Most public and private higher learning institutions nowadays has also taken in students even with minimum eligibility, in line with the policy of widening access to higher education but the quality of education is still not quite up to par to accommodate and develop these category of students. Academicians also grumble that due to the rush of initiatives and activities, there is little time to think and limited time too for “pauses of wisdom”. Last but not least, the influx of foreign students has also caused a lot of problems in higher education institutions and the society at large. It is high time for leaders and academicians to sit down, ponder, reflect and take initiatives to insure that higher education institutions provide academically qualified students with not only quality education for them to succeed in life, but also an education which will result in their valuing discipline, being caring and giving individuals.

KEYWORDS – *Dysfunctional View, Functional View, Higher Education*

1. Introduction

Higher Education has indeed gone through tremendous changes and development parallel to the requirement and needs of our progressive world. This scenario, at the same time, shows the vital and ever-evolving role of higher education institutions and on the other flip of the coin, the “turmoil caused over the past few centuries” (Brezis & Crouzet, 2004). In the beginning stage of higher education, universities were generally part of religious establishment teaching and specializing in liberal arts, philosophy and theology. Obviously, the main role was to

prepare the students for a career in the respective holy houses. At a later stage, however, some of the universities became famous for other specialized fields too, to name a few, law in Bologna and medicine in Montpellier (Brezis & Crouzet, 2004). Universities had undergone a reformation process in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when they started teaching new subjects, particularly the sciences. Still, the universities were just sources of knowledge reference and provider, and a university degree was not necessary for a career, except in a few specific professions. As the world developed progressively, a drastic change took place in higher education during the last half of the twentieth century (Brezis & Crouzet, 2004).

Democratization of the higher education transpired, especially in the West where the number of universities and colleges rose tremendously, prompting the number of students to increase even more. Universities became heterogeneous not only in their specializations, but also in their quality and when nearly 40% of the population attends colleges or universities, uniformity in their quality is impossible (Brezis & Crouzet, 2004). Additionally, these changes brought about a distinction between the elite universities, where the selection process became meritocratic, and the non-elite universities. This distinctive feature of the higher education slowly but progressively changed the way in which elites of nations and organizations throughout the world are recruited, “as the main criteria of their selection and recruitment became graduation from elite universities and schools to which admission was conferred following success at meritocratic examinations” (Brezis & Crouzet, 2004).

The system of higher education had its origin in Europe in the Middle Ages, when the first universities were established. In modern times the nature of higher education around the world has been largely determined by the models established in influential countries such as France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Views on Higher Education could be seen as “two sides of a coin”. On one side is what sociologists termed as the functional view on higher education which includes primarily the source of better income and wealth, status symbols, social prestige and respect from people. Flipping the coin to the other side is the dysfunctional view pertaining to higher education which underlines the fact that higher education creates social classes that causes mental imperialism, colonialism in education and also surprisingly inhibits people’s creativity and innovation.

2. Functional View of Higher Education

First and foremost, in most nations including Malaysia’s context, the author strongly believes people would agree beyond a shadow of a doubt, that higher education has produced quality workforce for the nation. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed once put it sternly straightforward, “*The more people with tertiary qualification, the better the chances for nation to develop.*” Through higher education, Malaysians have striven to acquire for as much knowledge as possible to keep up with the ever-changing environment and requirements of industry players. Not only that, by organizing conferences and workshops too, higher learning institutions have been providing platforms to share information, exchange experiences and realize common development goals. As a result, because of this functional view and belief on higher education, Malaysia stands tall in the eyes of the world, gaining not only economic wealth for the nation and its people but also respect and prestige from other countries.

Following this proven track record, the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) has been giving out loans in order to provide equal opportunities for students who wish to pursue studies at tertiary education. Further to that, PTPTN has also successfully realized the leaders’ dream of providing free tertiary education to some extent by converting loans to scholarships for graduates who attain first-class degree. All these efforts are put in to realize the democratization of higher education and to gradually generate better income, status, social prestige and respect for the citizens and the nation as a whole. Notwithstanding the criticism, Malaysia tertiary education continues to contribute to the education of a critical mass of bureaucrats, technocrats, managers and professionals in various fields.

Looking at another perspective, Malaysia higher education has also trained more than 100,000 foreign students from more than 120 countries last year alone. These graduates have gone back to their countries to contribute to the development or reconstruction of their societies and nations and, at the same time, bringing in approximately more than RM4 billion annually. Equally successful are the hundreds of thousands of Malaysians who have also benefited from their education abroad in a wide range of fields of human knowledge and they have come back and contributed to the development of the country.

3. Dysfunctional View on Higher Education

Shifting the gear to the dysfunctional view on higher education, while pursuing the afore-mentioned noble intention, this “legitimate knowledge” of higher education has gained enough merit to garner power for whoever has possession of it (Córdova, 1997). In this way, higher education as a system allocates power and money to those who are considered the most “fit” and credible according to socially established standards. This power imbalance, without us realizing it, has contributed to the widening of social class differences and the narrowing of prospective opportunities.

The individuals who are members of the middle and upper classes gain the most societal power as higher education provides them such proficiencies as political skills and bargaining tools. Thus, higher education breeds middle and upper class citizens who gain greater benefits than those in the lower class. In having the power to determine the credible truths of society, higher education has granted degrees that translate into political tools, economic mobility, and ultimately power for those who are able to gain access to a college or university. In doing so, higher education as a system oppresses those from the lower class perpetuating social class disparities through economic and cultural means.

Higher education has also become a type of market for career advancement that is drifting out of the reach of those in lower socioeconomic classes. In the United States, for instance, according to Scott L. Thomas (2004) due to the effects of a globalized economy, obtaining a degree in higher education is not only an advantage but also a necessity for gaining access into “quality jobs and economic opportunities” (p. 105). U.S. education, he further claims, has become a primary vehicle to advance one’s social class. This is apparent in the vast differences between job descriptions, benefits, and compensation among those who do and do not attend college. In short, the U.S. economy has enabled the university and college degree to act as a mechanism that maintains or advances one’s social class and therefore one’s power.

Another vital example of higher education dysfunction being experienced in the so-called “one of the most developed nations of the world”, the United States, explains David Brooks (2005) is how economic circumstances affect one’s educational opportunities in the United States, stating that almost 75% of students in the top quarter of the population have a chance at obtaining a university degree. However, students in the lowest class brackets are least likely to obtain a degree, at 8.6% (para. 10). This drastic difference suggests that those in lower classes have a severe disadvantage in gaining access to higher education. If those in the majority of the upper and middle classes have the best chances at obtaining these degrees, they would also have the best career placement opportunities. In fact, in 2010, 42% of jobs in the United States required a university degree (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, p. 126).

Having these educational credentials and career experiences would help individuals advance economically and professionally. Those with a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2000 made twice the median income of high school graduates (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, p. 126). They have the ability to move into larger salary brackets, assimilate into higher class cultures, and increase their cultural capital or political influence. Meanwhile, those who are unable to obtain access to higher education will experience a disadvantage in each of these realms. In relation to these statistics, students’ motivations for attending college have also shifted over the last few decades. Thomas (2004) refers to an annual study by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, which shows that in 1966, 84% of entering first-year students were primarily seeking to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” while in university. As of 1990, approximately the same percent of students were more concerned with being “very well off financially” at the conclusion of their college education (p. 109). Since 1990, financial success is still considered a primary goal of education for the majority of students. Students’ shift in perspective is reflective of how higher education’s role in stratifying social class.

Historically, those who obtained an education would be considered “better” than others by society’s standards. Saying that a particular type of knowledge or way of learning is better than another, however, enhances the societal expectation that all people should find such revered things as education desirable (Downie, Loudfoot, & Telfer, 1974). Using these labels places more value on an education or a degree compared to goals that have less credibility or clout. This point reinforces a binary of what is right and wrong and the elitist culture of higher education. Bishop (2005) also explains that U.S. culture relies on this type of dualistic meaning-making: “*We tend to think in mutually exclusive categories: bad or good, subjective or objective*” (p. 121). Assigning values to education is just one example of how higher education as a system is able to convert knowledge into bargaining tools for power. This is one way society has been able to delegate credibility and power to those who know their rights and wrongs (as determined by the elite) within a dualistic framework of U.S. culture. Institutions of higher education easily measure such merit in “a unique hodgepodge of standardized test scores, grades, and extracurricular activities” (Thomas, 2004, p. 114). Those who excel within these areas will be considered the best students and most fit

individuals for society. This kind of merit serves as a type of currency within U.S. society. By determining who is best by the academic standards of an institution, education begins to stratify those who succeed within the structures of a university and those who do not or never make it there.

This merit is based on middle- and upper-class standards of excellence that give benefits to certain people over others. Such examples include excelling on particular types of examinations, demonstrating skills in certain subject areas, and valuing narrowed ideals of intellectualism. Donna Langston (2004) examines one example of how education is structured as a classist system that divides students according to these standards. The classist system is perpetuated in schools with the tracking system, whereby the “dumbs” are tracked into homemaking, shop courses, and vocational school futures, while the “smarts” end up in advanced math, science, literature, and college-prep courses. If we examine these groups carefully, the coincidence of poor and working-class backgrounds with “dumbs” is rather alarming. Many educational experiences are created and evaluated in ways that give advantages to one type of student over another. Examples of this culture can be seen in academic expectations of using appropriate language and formal writing. Both of these presuppose, as Langston argues, knowledge of middle-class culture. As individuals gain academic merit through these expectations, they also gain credibility in society. Since today’s societies place value on these attainable merits, it also determines who is fit to have the most power over decision making and culture creating. Therefore, educational tactics that separate the “dumbs” from the “smarts” contribute to the growing divide of social class and societal power.

Córdova (1997) explains the power of higher education in determining legitimate knowledge and its function as a source of credibility in society. She writes, “*The University is a central location for establishing knowledge as a discourse of power, where the power to decide what is considered truth or not, is tied to the power to legitimate that truth (or non-truth)*” (p. 209). In other words, the university acts as an authority of scholarship and knowledge, thus influencing the truths of society. If U.S. society values the truths associated with legitimate knowledge, then those who have access to education will also have access to influence and power, thus becoming part of the dominant class. Institutions of higher education serve as a major source of legitimate knowledge that can later translate into power for the middle and upper classes.

For each of the above reasons, higher education acts as a resource from which individuals can access merit, social mobility, and ultimately power. Higher education continues to heighten class mobility for some and stunt it for others; therefore, it oppresses individuals in lower socioeconomic statuses. Bishop (2005) explains that such institutional structures as higher education set “strong norms about who is valuable and who is not, and what actions are out of bounds and who can punish those that cross the lines or do not have the right to be where they are” (p. 77). By identifying who is valuable and limiting what actions are acceptable, systems of higher education further perpetuate class inequities. Bishop’s explanation reinforces the oppressive consequences of how higher education functions within U.S. society.

In Malaysia’s perspective, nowadays most public and private higher learning institutions will take in students even with minimum eligibility, in line with the policy of widening access to higher education. The quality of education at a number of private colleges is also not quite up to par and some have completely lost sight of their main objective. Private education providers must be more proactive in defining their role and ensuring that they provide quality education to their students. The challenge here continues to be educating competent and knowledgeable people who possess adaptive thinking skills and not just mechanical mindsets. However, there is an exciting rush of policy and ideas under programs such as the Professors’ Council and academic excellence awards. Bold and promising initiatives, such as the establishment of INCEIF University (the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance), Aswara University (the National Arts, Culture and Heritage academy) and the Genovasi Initiative of innovation ambassadors (designed to become a university) have preoccupied the lives and achievements of academicians.

Academicians grumble that “there are so many activities that there is little time to think”. The danger in the enterprise is disillusionment creeping in slowly because of the rush of initiatives and activities that do not allow for “pauses of wisdom”. On top of this, the question also remains whether universities are collaborating effectively with the pioneers of knowledge society from industries, civil societies and other knowledge organizations. Also, the influx of foreign students into Malaysia has caused a lot of problems in higher education institutions and the society at large. As highlighted by Professor Datuk Wira Dr Mohd Shukri Ab Yajid, President of MSU (NST 15/03/2012, pg 9), one of the mutual issues among many institutions is that some international students demand that they be given five-star treatment. They may think they have bargaining power as they see themselves as clients. But higher education institutions are not retail outlets and equating students with consumers is not viable even if they pay the full cost of their education. Dewan Rakyat has also highlighted in one of its sessions that foreign students have contributed in the rising number of crimes. For instance, according to our Deputy Home Minister, 777 foreign

students were arrested since last year over involvement in various criminal activities, including drug trafficking and abuse, robberies and fights. Their presence has also influenced and increased the number of local students being used as drug mules.

4. Conclusion

To conclude this discussion, the author believes it is high time for us to really delve into the dysfunctions of our higher education industry. Let us go back to the basics and consolidate the four pillars of learning advocated by UNESCO - learning to do, learning to know, learning to be and learning to live together – in order to allow for the advancement of academia and socio-behavioural development as an integral part of the core curriculum. This feature of combining academic relevance, social engagement and recreationally enriching experiences ought to be the anchor of higher education institutions.

In other words, higher education needs to be characterised not only by high quality education but also the humanitarian values aimed at empowering the respective societies of the world. Higher Education ought to provide academically qualified students with not only quality education for them to succeed in life, but also an education which will result in their valuing discipline, being caring and giving individuals.

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