

Knowledge and Creativity for a Sustainable World: the Universiti Sains Malaysia Approach

James Campbell
Deakin University
Australia

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Synopsis

Sustainability is a critical aim of Malaysian public policy and an important aim in education. Nonetheless, what sustainability means as it relates to education and the relationship between education and a sustainable future is unclear. In this paper I shall investigate the role that Universities in Malaysia play in shifting the practice and culture of innovation and creativity towards more sustainable values and outcomes. Sustainable education is based on ensuring that the capacities of students and the broader society are reengaged and empowered through connecting education to the needs and aspirations of civil society and moving away from neo-liberal ideas of education as a practice of consumption towards, sustainable values of advancing human dignity. Creativity and innovation within such an educational framework are goals and practices deeply connected and embedded within sustainable commitments to social justice and the public good, as well as individual growth and development, which provide a critical legitimizing principle for university research and teaching.

One of the key theoretical influences in making this argument is drawn from the arguments of Amartya Sen, whose theorization of capability may provide us with a way of thinking about social growth and development that is not possessively individualistic but rather socially concerned. I will discuss this in reference to the approach of University Sains Malaysia which provides an example of a public University seeking to engage sustainability and tie educational creativity and innovation back to the common good and a sustainable future. The philosophical aim of this paper is to show how universities can pursue creativity and innovation as socially useful practices for advancing humane and sustainable values throughout Malaysian society and avoid the fusion of creativity with possessive individualism, consumerization and social irresponsibility.

“To realise our national aspirations, a concerted effort is needed to increase our nation’s competitiveness, productivity and innovativeness. Attributes such as desire for knowledge, innovative thinking, creativity and competitiveness must be imbued within our people. The inculcation of moral values, progressiveness and performance-based cultures must also be instilled if we are to nurture successful individuals of the highest quality. This will determine our success as a knowledge-based economy.” (Badawi 2007)

Introduction

Contemporary Malaysian public policy in the realm of education involves the espousal of several critical binaries. One critical binary that is the subject of this paper is the binary between sustainability and creativity. The recent awarding of APEX status to the University Sains Malaysia was in part due to its articulation of an educational agenda that combined both a commitment to sustainability as well as a commitment to creativity(2008; Razak 2006; Salleh 2006; Zakri 2006). This project combines two central aims of Malaysian public policy in regards to national development and engaging the knowledge economy. Yet the apparent simplicity and clarity of the aims belies the complex social, economic, political and cultural analysis that informs the APEX agenda.

This paper seeks to look at the USM agenda concerning sustainability and creativity and contextualize it within broader debates over neo-liberalism, globalization and the aims of Malaysian Higher Education. If we take a close look at Malaysian public policy documents and the aims of Malaysian public policy, we can see the central defining concept of sustainability as well as engaging the knowledge economy as critical objectives of Malaysian public policy. The National Vision policy 2001-2010(Wee 2003) has the following basic aims in building a resilient nation:

- Promoting an equitable society;
- Sustaining high economic growth;
- Enhancing competitiveness;
- Developing a knowledge-based economy;
- Strengthening human resource development; and
- Pursuing environmentally sustainable development.