

DECOLONISING EDUCATION

IN the spirit of Merdeka, which will be celebrated tomorrow, there is no better time to discuss the relevance of the recently released statement from the International Conference on Decolonisation and Leadership Issues in University Education held on Nottingham University Malaysia Campus.

This is the third in a series of events which aims to improve diversity

of education in an increasingly homogenous, if colonised, world of learning. Given the intent to implement “transfor-



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mation” in universities under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015-2025), the statement can provide better context and perspectives in considering the ultimate in education transformation in the country.

The statement recognises that the modern (read Western) knowledge system (science, mathematics, social sciences) has moved like a juggernaut across the educational environments in the rest of the world — often imposed, but sometimes even welcomed for the ben-

efits perceived to be gained from adopting it.

In contrast, hundreds of knowledge systems, which are equally valid and provide sustainable livelihoods in societies outside the West for hundreds of years, have been summarily ignored, marginalised and often blindly repudiated by the modern university system as it based itself on the curricula that evolved and was subsequently developed in the Western world.

Though this modern knowledge system brings in seemingly amazing results, we now recognise it also carries the seeds of major disruption of ecosystems of the planet.

The gains have been short-term. This challenge to planetary survival has had a

backwater effect on people’s perceptions of the Western knowledge system. Serious thinkers — starting from Mahatma Gandhi — have been calling for a fundamental rethink.

The decolonisation agenda concluded that a major imbalance has developed between the knowledge system associated with Western societies and those that continue to survive among other societies that may not necessarily like being identified as Western or which desire strongly to maintain their separate and unique identities. The conference discussion inevitably focused on the restoration of balance.

Turn to page 11

WISDOM OF SOCIETIES

From page 9

It sought a new consensus among educators, professors, lecturers, administrators, students, policy makers and governments that the restoration of balance among various valid systems of knowledge may be considered a significant goal in the making of educational policies.

All things considered, participants agreed it may never be wise to place all of humanity’s hopes in one basket, to have only one perception of a problem, and deprive emerging generations of

the wisdom of societies that has created a fertile environment for sustainable living over centuries.

The seeds of this planet’s survival need to be sought in these systems of knowledge as they have indeed displayed persistently and consistently their ability to survive without gross, unbalanced and unacceptably huge ecological footprints that threaten everyone.

Merely conceding or agreeing on this, however, will not instantly light pathways that need to be necessarily adopted.

As far as universities and their administrations are concerned, there is a practical problem of the way this shift may be achieved in terms of design or re-design of curricula.

The experiences shared by the conference participants in their papers and presentations highlighted that it is possible to bring about curricular change in education (including possibly new

disciplines) based on a critical review of existing colonised curricula from Western universities.

Concrete examples of curricular change were discussed, including the following: decolonised or non-Eurocentric courses in philosophy; history and philosophy of science; mathematics; statistics for social sciences; physics; open source computing; ethics; experiences in the teaching of English without damaging mother tongues; Islamic sociology and anthropology; non-allopathic (Iranian, for example) health approaches; and new historiographies to replace biased, Eurocentric ones (Suriname history, for example); and the use of community sites of knowledge, hitherto ignored, as an important tool for university teaching, research and linkages with employment.

The conference was exposed to new and exciting options for informal higher education without certification under the Swaraj University from India, for example. Presentations highlighted educational systems and ideas rooted in local beliefs and values, some within the framework of Islam.

Since the experience of decolonising curricula did not appear to be difficult or impossible, the conference made

a recommendation for a time-bound change in the following terms:

- Decolonise a minimum of 10 per cent of university courses every three years.

- Ensure a board or committee to oversee the effective achievement of this target, and to assist in the removal of difficulties and obstacles.

- Other specific measures suggested:
 - Conduct workshops for graduate students from the region and other countries relating to the decolonisation agenda and its themes.

- Organise the production of new non-Eurocentric text/reference books by scholars/writers for the purpose of this work, and for use in universities.

This means that through education, Merdeka can not only be protected but also strengthened and deepened.

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