

## EDUCATING Our Youth to Lead the Future

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I do not exaggerate when I say that the future is in the hands of you, the young. Nature ensures continuity through evolution. With each passing generation, the next is ready to take over. In the natural world, this happens automatically. In human society, much has to be done to prepare youth to lead the future.

We have to keep pace with rapid change in the world. Otherwise, we will be left behind, marginalised.

The community has a clear responsibility to guide its youth into the future. But this responsibility must translate into practice. Youth everywhere is idealistic, full of aspiration. Whatever is done in the name of progress must not dampen your enthusiasm nor must it negate the development of your full potential.

Education is the main channel to propel the young into positions of leadership and responsibility.

Let me begin by discussing the university education that we see as basic to the advancement of human civilisation.



Historically, universities have been centres of civilized life, centres of culture, of moral and intellectual development. The present university model, developed during the Industrial Age, has served us well. Education has led to economic development and development has led to social transformation. Today's universities are seen as utilitarian. They must provide a skilled workforce. They must engage in income-generating research. They must contribute to national wealth creation.

But the Industrial Age is coming to an end. The Information Age is upon us. Knowledge is exploding. The University has to realign to meet new demands. All of us need to think about the future shape and focus on higher education: how can modern universities maintain the right balance between functioning as intellectual centres and functioning as agents for social and economic progress? This question calls for a change of culture, a change of attitude, a change of thinking by the academic community.

The current higher education system is "elitist" and restrictive. A large segment of the population is excluded. But education is the key to human development.

Knowledge creation and transfer are to the coming century what production and distribution of goods was to the last. Education is empowerment. It enables people to become agents of change. Most of all, it plays the pivotal role in the cultivation of future leaders, social and economic entrepreneurs.

The concept of education has changed. Today, it is "learning without frontiers", unrestricted by barriers of age, time, space, income or cultural difference. It is global. It is lifelong - a continuous process of improving one's knowledge and skills, of cultivating creative potential, of bringing about personal development, of establishing bonds between individuals, groups, nations, generations.

The education system of the next century, of your century, must bring forth a knowledge-based society where individuals are more creative, innovative, productive, and most of all, responsible. Is this an ambitious goal? Yes, but it is absolutely necessary.

It will not be enough for universities to provide individuals with knowledge, important though that knowledge is. They must provide individuals with the tools to communicate, to adventure, to lead. Our present education system does almost nothing to nurture creativity and the development of the whole person. We have based our system on a narrow, shallow concept of human development. The concept needs to be broader, deeper, to sustain us in the next phase. I know this is a difficult and sensitive area, but we have to experiment to understand.

Each human being comes into the world with infinite creative potential. Rather than exploit this potential, our present education system stifles it.

What do I mean by creativity? I mean the ability to bring new realities into being by force of imagination, the inclination to see and experience life in new and different ways, the confidence to challenge assumptions, to solve problems with insight, determination, and originality.

The creative individual is, perhaps, the greatest asset of mankind, but he or she is often unappreciated or ignored. As Mark Twain so aptly put it, "Anyone with a new idea is a crank - until the idea succeeds." Yet the advancement of civilisation is due to little else but the ingenuity and creativity of the human spirit. Inventions are nothing but boundless imagination.

Technology, from the wheel to the space shuttle; media, from the printing press to the personal computer; all the music, art, architecture that transform the quality of our existence; the Complete Works of Shakespeare, Star Wars: Episode One, the Phantom Menace - all have one thing in common. They all started with an empty notebook on an empty table. Looking down at those blank pages was a creative, imaginative human being. Today, he or she may be staring at a blank screen and a blinking cursor - but it's the same thing.

George Bernard Shaw stated that "Imagination is the beginning of creation. We imagine what we desire; we will what we imagine; and at last we create what we will."

Albert Einstein : "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

I believe that creativity is not a special gift of the chosen few. It is a common trait of many. Children are inherently creative. But by the time they become adults, that special flame has been snuffed out. Why? What happened along the way? Any institution or nation that wishes to progress from the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Imagination Age must answer that question. Education must unleash the spirit of creativity in youth; it must reopen the locked doors in adults; it must light torches in the individuals who will lead the way.

Our present education system is largely skewed toward rote learning. Memorising the correct answers is favoured over asking the right questions. Results are everything.

If Asia aspires to be scientifically and technologically on par with the West, then more has to be done to encourage creative, divergent thinking in our students. The system should focus more on the learner's own curiosity, discovery, pace of comprehension, originality. Students should invent solutions, not memorise answers. Learning in this way is not only more effective; it is more enjoyable and less boring. Moreover, it develops a creative human being.



Along with an inquiring mind, the young should also develop a spirit of adventure. They must have the courage to insist that the education they receive shift its paradigm to focus on their own well-being and development.

Higher education is generally discipline-oriented with a high degree of specialisation. While society does require a large number of specialists to perform specific tasks, it is questionable how much specialisation is necessary or desirable at the undergraduate level. Individuals who succeed in the marketplace (and in life) are generally those with the ability and talent to solve problems creatively and effectively.

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Universities must recreate their educational product with this in mind. Now, Asian families possess a restricted, utilitarian view of education. They regard the university years as preparation for a living, not a life. Students and parents alike see the Bachelor's degree as a piece of paper, which will serve as an entry to a career - the more selective and prestigious the better. Law, Medicine, Engineering.

But we only get one chance at education. Is a narrow set of specialised skills all we want to acquire? Are these skills really going to be enough to sustain us for the half-century or more we have to live through after we are awarded our diploma? Take a look at any fifty-year-old textbook in science, engineering, medicine. It's all outmoded. Fifty-year-old technology is obsolete. Fifty years ago, most of the technology and science we use today have not even been imagined. And the world will spin even more quickly in your fifty years.

Specialised skills have a short shelf life. They have to be constantly re-learned. I am not saying that you should not have a specialisation. But a specialisation is not all you will need. Wear blinkers and you will be blindsided by the future.

Graduates of your generation will not only have to become a highly skilled, competent workforce, they will need the resourcefulness to generate their own employment and create enterprises which will employ others. Their thinking will have to cross boundaries, constantly adapting to a changing world. Therefore, the undergraduate curriculum should be more broad-based and multi-disciplinary in nature - communications skills, thinking skills, basic computer literacy, leadership, problem solving. The drones of the future will dig up the information: the shapers of the future will put that information to new and undreamed of uses.

As I implied before, the so-called Information Age, is, as we speak, transforming itself into the Imagination Age. This means that skills that used to be considered “impractical,” marginal to the educational process, particularly in Asia, are rapidly becoming not only practical, but also integral and essential. We can no longer consider the creative as something exotic and unnecessary. We can no longer afford to educate technicians by the thousands and ignore the communicators, the abstract thinkers, the artists. Artistry, independent thinking, and communicative skills are fundamental to the next stage of economic progress. Singapore has already realised this and is restructuring both its secondary and university levels education to include more process-oriented education, more emphasis on divergent thinking skills, and more creative subjects. Singapore has an exceedingly pragmatic government and a highly regimented society. Why this new policy?



Because new ideas means wealth. The highest value added is the value added by originality. The American economy's most profitable export is imagination - Hollywood films, television programmes, the media. A passive, uncreative population invariably hits a glass ceiling. They can produce the compact disc players but not the compact discs. They can make the hardware, but not the software. Businesses are always one step behind, waiting for others to come up with the ideas. They are still in the tunnel. Our students must be encouraged to think laterally - to break out of boxes, to learn the ways of the arts and the sciences. They must not be satisfied with answers learned from a teacher. They must find their own questions and create their own answers.

Those who seek out the new visions, those who dream the dreams and take the risks, they are the ones who will shape society. Those who can communicate visions to others, those who can inspire, they are the ones who will lead society.

Our education system currently makes no effort to develop the shapers and the leaders. It must do so in the future. For when societies do not create shapers and leaders of their own, outsiders do it for them.

Finally, in imagining the University of the future, we need to consider the phenomenon of Globalisation. The rapid interfacing of diverse cultures creates enormous potential both for friction and hope. The education we provide should encourage respect for different individuals and cultures, promote sustainable human development, and encourage mutual understanding. The culture of peace must be engendered, nurtured, sustained at all cost. Malaysians should view our country's diversity, and that of the rest of the world, as a blessing, not a handicap. As we can see by looking at the world today, peace among people can never be taken for granted. It has to be learnt and cultivated.

Globalisation will invariably lead to networking and strategic interaction among universities, corporations, institutions, and centres. There is a particular need for Asian universities to develop links. Regional networking will be a catalyst for the creation of education which supports respect among nations, fosters interaction among cultures, allows for differing points of view, creates world class graduates with world class talent and global perspective. The more interaction between universities, the more international recognition these universities receive, the more genuinely democratic the education they provide; the more benefit they derive from shared teaching and research.

Asian universities should learn from multinational corporations. These companies succeed because they capitalise on regional competency rather than on the strength of a single nation to optimise their operations. Asia's future prosperity depends not so much on direct competition among member states but on their ability to complement one another. This is not an easy process but do we have a choice if we want to lead the world economically and politically? Do we want the next Millennium to be the Asian Millennium? The place to begin is in our own universities.

In the last century, a small number of British universities - Oxford, Cambridge, the London School of Economics, and a few others provided the leadership for the British Empire. In this century, a small number of American universities, the Ivy League and a few others, have provided the United States with much of its political, corporate, and artistic excellence and influence. In the next century, your century — your children's century, our Asian Universities, must transcend borders to provide vision, excellence, innovation, inspiration — so that we can create a Pacific civilisation full of prosperity, hope, achievement, and peace.

As I said at the beginning of this speech, the future is in your hands. Ask yourself this question: Is university education as it is in Asia today the education you want for your children? If the answer is "No," then you and your generation have to be at the leading edge of the creation of something new, something better. I have given you my vision. But it is your vision that will determine your future.

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