

AN INTERVIEW WITH DATO' SYED AHMAD HUSSEIN ON THE 19TH OF APRIL 2011

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QUALIFICATIONS**

UNIVERSAL NEWS:

Could you please comment on the role of education in Southeast Asia?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: I think the simple premise of the contemporary world is the same premise of the old world; that is, there is no progress without learning. You cannot sustain progress, modernity and development without continuing with learning. Increasingly the idea of learning takes the form of higher education, degrees and qualifications; these are just the manifestations of learning. I believe that in South East Asia, as an emerging economy, the idea of learning has become a necessity, because of development. Every government and every society will pursue this if they want to sustain a level of development and keep improving; learning is essential for sustaining development and ensuring modernity and progress. The difference would be in the quality of learning and not in the number of institutions, because access is not really an issue. In many countries, anyone who wants to learn can learn, the issue is about quality. In tomorrow's world people will be looking for quality education rather than just any education, this is where MQA comes in. When Malaysia talks about being a centre of learning it means two things. Firstly, it wants people to come here to learn but secondly and more importantly when people come to learn, you also learn; learning is always interactive, an exchange.

One of the reasons Malaysian education keeps improving is because people come here to learn and we also learn from them. This is the debate I have been having with the Ministry of Higher Education again and again. When we talk about internationalisation, we do not talk about the world coming to us, rather about our learning from the world because there are so many exchanges. There is nothing more important in learning than

diversity. Through diversity we learn, and I have made this argument that there is a clear distinction between variety and diversity. Many people when talking about internationalisation talk about diversity, and the most important point is diversity in thinking. Once you get the diversity in thinking and in ideologies at all levels the higher the level of education and the greater the level of diversity. This is what higher education must be about and I think in the new global world the challenge is to be highly diverse and interactive; an open world that allows for these changes.

There is no point in having thousands of universities if they are not all of high quality and the definitive ingredient of this quality is diversity and this is what we believe in. We were formed in 1996 with this agenda in mind. We have another important agenda; which is that in the final analysis quality must be the responsibility of learner and the provider, not some external entities. The important aspect is providing a platform that allows institutions and learners to improve quality. When we began, I admit we were like policemen and told people what to do but that was because we began in an environment where private education was extremely new and education for the first time in this country has become commercialised. Thinking about how we can make money from education, we know that you can make profit and maintain high quality, and our job is to ensure quality. We started being policemen but slowly we moved away from this method by becoming a serious facilitator for quality improvement. We encouraged people to take up the responsibility of continuous quality improvement. I think we are quite successful in this and by now in Malaysia I can vouch that all universities and colleges have made quality as a natural part of the higher education system.

Universal News: If diversity and the spirit of continuous improvement are such important ingredients to ensure the highest quality of education, how does Malaysia compete?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: I think we keep increasing the dimensions and they are becoming more and more a real part and parcel of Malaysian higher education. It took us around ten years to build this. It is about how these interactions build up. Now we have come to a stage, and MQA has

contributed somewhat in creating an environment where quality is a natural part of education. Now we are moving to another stage where bodies like us, work as partners rather than as facilitators. I think by 2012 we hope to launch a new concept in the true spirit of governance, that nobody can do things alone in this complex world. We need partners and together we can build high quality education. I think this is a natural movement in which education and learning have become a real element of modern civilisation, moving toward partnerships.

Universal News: Who are the main stakeholders?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: The core would be the provider of higher education, mainly universities. Again in the spirit of governance and partnership nobody can live alone. The government, government agencies, parents, NGO's, foreign policies and everybody forms this large complex partnership. My vision for MQA is that ideally it should wither away and eventually become smaller and smaller, because the responsibility should be taken over and quality achieved. We are aware of so many other things that contribute to quality, a good example would be rating and ranking. There is an interesting analogy comparing ranking and quality assurance: ranking is like fast food; you know who is the first but not meant to use it to judge in the long run. Quality assurance is like the food pyramid. It is slow and steady but sustains health. Ranking has its role as a quick reference but it cannot be the decisive factor, maybe for individuals but not for an entire country.

Universal News: Looking at it from a regional perspective. How are different mechanisms of Quality Assurance Management (QAM) working together?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: The more diverse you are the more aware you are of the commonalities we share; we can be united without being uniform. Different people do things in different ways. With QA there is a huge convergence of what we do. QA is about nurturing confidence. QA bodies can retreat when institutions give off confidence and people trust in the institutions. Nobody checks on MQA if they want to go to Harvard do

they? There is a certain level of trust and confidence in the institution. The same thing is happening across South East Asia, there is a building of confidence and we hope that together we can build a common level of confidence. The more you control the more there is an indication of a lack of confidence; you need to go beyond that. Quality is not definitive and not merely about numbers.

Universal News: What have you achieved so far in the third year of your existence?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: At the moment there are many QA bodies; we do not want too much overlapping. Just like any good universities quality is about learning, knowing what you do best and about testing and piloting. Our biggest activity is to learn from each other and we do this by staying at each other's houses. We have housed many people; it is like learning a language but you exchange expertise and grow together learning from each other's cultures. When we have our national audit, our auditors come from different parts of Asia, this is another thing we want to do. We build our confidence together. Our main aim for the future is to have a mutual recognition agreement; we are beginning to talk to New Zealand now and hope to extend it with the U.K. and parts of South East Asia. Any QA body that says that a certain university has reached a certain standard we will trust their judgement and this allows for student and staff movements.

Universal News: The ultimate objective is to raise the overall quality of education throughout South East Asia. Is this compatible with keeping a competitive edge within Malaysia?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: Sometimes things are contradictory and there is a need for balance. On the one hand, nations still have an interest and want to be competitive, but we believe that Asia is not too big as a region and people are very mobile. I think we can offer the world a much higher level of quality education; someone from Italy can study different semesters in cities throughout Asia. We want to allow for movement and

diversity. Europe is doing this but South East Asia can do this well because it is actually small. You can do a semester in Bangkok, then maybe another in Singapore. One day I think South East Asia will become one big center for learning. People are very mobile and the world will have confidence. With the Internet, basic theoretical knowledge is easy to come by; you do not need to travel across the world. But, it is about learning other people's cultures, creativity and learning. There is no need for us to get a student to do a full qualification here; it could be just a semester or maybe a year. It has become easier and easier to do this for shorter periods. We have some very good schools here, top ones in Singapore for example.

Universal News: Eighteen universities, both public and private, have been ranked as excellent. Since then the rating system has been modified, what are the new variables?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: Personally we are not really into ranking and believe it is a flawed system. Rating is a list and a public announcement of results that allows universities to be put into clusters for different areas, rather than number one and two. It allows universities to go to the next tier and it is more inclusive. Rating allows you to be part of a larger grouping although the believability of big changes in a university's rating over one year is questionable. Rating and ranking figures can be massaged. We want to put these ratings up higher so that you need 95 and above to get six stars for instance, so we push the quality boundaries higher and higher. The methodology for rating is something we decided to keep only for teaching and learning. The total student experience for a university is also important. There are some areas such as the percentage of professors that are more subjective but we know this. Although there is a difference between a PhD from Oxford or Harvard and other lesser known places. At the end of the day we use these indicators and moderate it to get a fairer indication. We measure achievement for success.

Universal News: What do you believe is the perception of educational quality from the international community and how has the MQA assisted in building Malaysia's academic image?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: Perhaps the first part of quality assurance is the responsibility of the institutions. If we have a factory that produces 'A' and it does not want to improve, it is up to it to decide. Do we engage with industries? We do, but more importantly the standards for MQA certainly have this as one of the most important aspects. You must consult everyone for curriculum development. In the final analysis current modern society has three major components: the State, the market and civil society. They must be consulted. There are some universities who express that they are not about marketability, they are into training and this is fine but they must consult parents about this.

Universal News: Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Education has been talking about the need for continuous development, including for more student bodies to participate in this debate. What can they add?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: I attended the Madrid conference and they were talking about the need for ranking and there was a representative of the European Student Union, a very young and smart boy of around seventeen or eighteen. He came up with a very important and interesting point. He said that the mantra of higher education now is student centered learning and learning outcomes are about the learner. But, when you look at the measurement of ranking there is not a single thing about the learner, it is just articles about Nobel prizes. Where is the learner? I found it a very interesting observation. Everything about learning is about the learner and their needs must be considered. In our standard we mention this. The learner has a choice not to be consulted but there must be an open challenge. We will leave how they do this to the institutions, but some of our suggestions include curriculum development. The teacher and the student must play their part in the curriculum development.

Universal News: What is your message to our readership about the future of South East Asia, with specific regard to education?

Dato' Syed Ahmad Hussein: I strongly believe that every country has something to offer to the world and we can learn from each other. South East Asia has not yet had this opportunity to offer to the world. The world

has learned a lot from the rest of the world but not South East Asia and if you look at the world as a dynamic and diverse interaction between people, one of the actor's (South East Asia) is yet to bloom and the whole region especially with its fusion between the external ideas and local cultures can teach the world a great deal. I visited Spain and was impressed with how they harmonised all the different cultures and religions living together.

Universal News: Thank you very much.