

The Imprint of Education

The Imprint of Education (TIE) is a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation that is exploring the post-graduation trajectories of Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program alumni. TIE is investigating topics such as ethical and transformative leadership, give back, employment and entrepreneurship, student support and mentoring. It consists of five sub-projects or learning activities. The TIE project principal investigators are Prof. Sharlene Swartz, Dr Alude Mahali and Dr Andrea Juan.



Reimagining the African University – Conversation Series

Learning Activity Four consists of a series of conversations with experienced scholars and thought leaders on the future of higher education in Africa. In Reimagining the African University, they discuss challenges, best practices, and the potential for innovation to initiate further dialogue. This transcript is part of a series of interviews conducted in 2021 and may be used with appropriate attribution for scholarly purposes. The learning activity is coordinated by Prof. Thierry Luescher, under the intellectual leadership of Prof. Crain Soudien.

Interview with Prof. Dzulkifli “Dzul” Abdul Razak Interview conducted by Prof. Catherine Odora Hoppers on 30 June 2021

Catherine Odora Hoppers: Could you please provide a sketch of your history of engagement in the higher education sector?

Dzul Razak: I must start with when I was a student. It was in the 1960s and there was the Vietnam War. The state of flux in higher education was very different from how it is now. I happened to be a science student, which was regarded highly, but I did not want to spend my whole time in a laboratory, I wanted to engage with the people, the community. So, I ventured out to join the non-governmental sector. At university I had been taught facts and figures, but it was outside the university that I received my true education. Then, when I returned to the higher education sector, I tried to bring the fruits of that experience and understanding with me – that is to confront the notion that the members of a university are only responsible for themselves and their institutions and that the outside community is irrelevant; and instead promote the idea of the university as belonging to the people. That is my vision.

So, when I became vice-chancellor of Universi Sains Malaysia¹ (USM), a new tagline, that the university was for “the bottom billions” was introduced. In other words, acknowledging the role of education as a leveller within society, a function that enables

¹ The Science University of Malaysia.

people to recreate their futures, the goal was to work for those who had lacked such opportunity. Otherwise, higher education institutions become just another skills shop.

The question then becomes one of how to nurture these people who have lost opportunity not through any fault of their own, but because of the larger economic and social structure and influences. In fact, universities were originally established to foster this broader idea of higher education, but from the middle of the 17th century and with the introduction of the industrial revolution, the notion of the university was re-interpreted until the present dominant conception of the university emerged, that is, as a factory churning human capital for economic purposes. Which is not to say that this conception is wrong *per se*, but rather that there is little balance in the kind of education that is on offer.

Odora Hoppers: What has been your role in, and vision for, the reconstruction of higher education in Malaysia?

Dzul Razak: When I became a vice-chancellor, I was under the impression that the university was a one-size-fits-all kind of institution based on a western model. In addition, this dominant idea of a world-class university emerged which proposed a number of key criteria that were supposed to be satisfied. But I soon learnt a bitter lesson, which was that despite best efforts to compete with the universities in the Global North on this basis, their resources are triple ours; and their tradition is 900years old while we just started yesterday. In other words, the game is rigged against us; and yet we are told to catch up with them.

And at this point I began to read around the subject and learned that in Malaysia we have our own philosophy of education which nobody was speaking about or considered relevant because they were adhering to the benchmarks established by the former colonial masters. And I found in this older, Malaysian philosophy of education the concept of “sejahtera”, which may bear comparison to the idea of “ubuntu” in South Africa. The term speaks to the idea of a balanced human being; the importance of working with a community; an idea of consciousness which is akin to concepts found in some religions; and the need for the individuals to contribute as a good citizen. Deploying this concept, I began to understand that it was possible to forge a different kind of university for a different world – one in which the notion of world-class as ivy league bore little relevance. In this regard, if you ask me whether the kind of university I am proposing is “world-class”, my response is: “It depends whose world you are talking about?” My world and your world may not be the same, and therefore we cannot and should not be producing the same kind of universities. In this regard, I think, my experience of higher education resonates more closely with Africa’s than Europe’s. We need to reconstruct our own universities with regard to our own

contexts, values and traditions – which is where the question of indigenous values becomes relevant.

So, I say there is a common heritage here in Africa and in Malaysia. The terms *sejahtera* and *ubuntu* may not have the same meaning but they denote a common heritage and are both used to redefine higher education institutions away from the western concept of the university as factory – which, as a senior figure at the International Association of Universities (IAU), including as president for four years, I found to be a common challenge around the world.

Odora Hoppers: How do you propose that those involved in higher education in Malaysia should self-reconstruct themselves?

Dzul Razak: Everybody that undertakes Malaysian education must experience *sejahtera* and the emphasis here should be on the word “experience”. They must *experience* *sejahtera* rather than merely know it. The idea is that people who have gone through *sejahtera* will become balanced human beings, psychologically, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically. Which is in contrast with the present curriculum, which is hardly balanced, but is heavily weighted to the cognitive and the intellectual, with a little bit of physical, but little spiritual input and no emotions at all.

This imbalance became evident under Covid-19. During the pandemic and subsequent lockdown the emotional frailty of my students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), where I am currently rector, was revealed. Many experienced mental health issues. However, if they had been educated in relation to their emotional and spiritual well-being, they would have been more resilient – but they lacked these skills. They know how to read, write and conduct research but not how to use this knowledge for themselves. So, I have become increasingly convinced that *sejahtera* needs to be reconceptualised in relation to education in order to foster balanced human beings who will be able to contribute to their communities. Indeed, the root cause of the social problems at many schools and in many communities in Malaysia is the lack of balance in individual lives.

So, the concept of *sejahtera* will inform the new post-Covid framework for education at IIUM.

Odora Hoppers: How does this philosophy relate to the governance structures in higher education?

Dzul Razak: The present governance structure is a corporate one. Many universities have a corporate communications unit. Some vice-chancellors call themselves CEOs. In general, the universities are run like an assembly line. The student moves from one

class to another at the ring of a bell. The first year is the first conveyer belt. You pass your quality control, you go to the second conveyer belt. You pass the quality control, which is the exams at the end of the year, there is a third conveyer belt. Then there is the last conveyer belt which is your final year; and then you get your degree. At that point the university is asked to evaluate themselves: How many of the graduates are employable, how many are marketable? If the student is marketable, the institution has succeeded; if not, it has failed. Following this logic, whenever a university is considering introducing a course, a market survey is first commissioned to determine its viability. If the market survey deems it irrelevant, then it is not offered. The result of this is that philosophy is down; literature is down; religious studies are down. Anything to do with social science and humanities is considered “irrelevant”. Senates just want information technology (IT), commerce and all that scientific stuff, which makes the imbalance even greater; and the question of emotions, of being human remains absent.

It is a dehumanising mechanism which I call “WEIRD”. W stands for “westernised”; E stands for “economic-centric”; I stands for “industrial-led”; R stands for “reputation-obsessed”; and D stands for “dehumanising”. That is how I describe the university today. W can also stand for “white”, as in an underlying white culture and jargon that has been imposed on people of colour; with whiteness becoming more clearly an issue since the murder of George Floyd, a black man, by white police in the United States (US) in 2020. This incident and the popular Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which was mounted in response changed the whole picture, I think. People began to understand that there is great racism and double standards in the West. These are issues that I think we need to bring to the fore in education so that we can clean it up.

Odora Hoppers: What strategies have you pursued to change a system which is so resistant to change?

Dzul Razak: When the United Nations introduced the concept of “education for sustainable development” in support of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2005, I leveraged the concept to promote a new approach to higher education in Malaysia. But there was resistance, for example, among senior professors who would tell me, “I became a professor without any such thing as sustainable development. So, if you ask me to do sustainable development, I will resign.” So, then I went to the students and asked for their views. They said they wanted sustainable development because it concerned the viability of their future. So then, they would go to class and ask the recalcitrant professors: Where is sustainable development in your lecture? Which left a particular professor who had threatened to resign with no choice but to meet the students’ demands. In this way, the students drove the whole university’s agenda, much to my delight.

Odora Hoppers: In relation to the role of students in governance, it is the students who bring the university to society, is it not?

Dzul Razak: Exactly. They are the ones who move it. As a result, when I was at USM, the university established a platform for them to tell the university what they wanted and what they did not want. I told them: "This university is your university, it is not my university. I am the vice chancellor, but it is your university. I am just running it for you. So, what is it that you want? But I do not want to hear complaints, I want to hear solutions and you must volunteer to help." Within a month, 30 student proposals for improving the university had arrived on my desk. These included one to ban Styrofoam and replace it with an environmentally sustainable product which was implemented across the university within another month. And then a further series of environmental initiatives were undertaken at the programme snowballed.

Odora Hoppers: In relation to indigenous knowledge and decolonisation, could you talk a little about your views on spirituality and education for sustainable development?

Dzul Razak: The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in 2015 make no mention of spirituality. This is understandable considering they emanate from a 1987 UN *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, commonly known as the Brundtland Report, which is not particularly indigenous or religious in its outlook. Indeed, analysis of the 17 goals has shown that there are elements of spirituality only in three or four of them, including the goals relating to education and peace. For a university that is also concerned with spirituality, this poses a challenge.

So, in order to consider spirituality in the context of sustainable development, I have proposed that we should add a further Sustainable Development Goal, an SDG 18, as a guide for the university, which will distinguish it from any university in the Global North. And spirituality here should not be taken as meaning only religion, but also indigenous knowledge.

So, this would create a different perspective on the issue of climate change, for example. Most of the studies on this indicate that it is people exploiting the environment which is the root of the problem. At the same time, it is widely believed that the best way of fixing this is to look beyond human behaviour to rules and policies – that if these are changed, the problem can be fixed. But the truth is that unless you change yourself, changing the outside world around you is not going to be easy. And this is where the idea of spirituality comes in – you need to change yourself first, which is part of the philosophy of education that I am trying to promote. Education is about changing yourself to enable you to change others.

Most vice-chancellors, when they start in office, they want to change everybody else but themselves. But the philosophy that I am promoting proposes that, the first business is to change yourself. As Gandhi said, change yourself and the world around you will change automatically. Spirituality in this particular context, regardless of the religious connotations attached to the concept, is for everybody who wants to produce change the inside-out way, not the outside-in way.

Odora Hoppers: Where does the issue of technology fit into the vision?

Dzul Razak: I think there is a widespread failure to understand the implication for the ways we live and learn of many current technologies, in particular the information and communications technologies (ICTs) which have been parachuted into our midst and to which many of us have become addicted. I think that the education system in particular has been hijacked by technology although it is also true that we cannot learn without it.

In this context, great store has been placed on the idea of “speed of learning”. But actually, speed is not that important in education. In fact, it can be counter-productive if you are unable to reflect. If you are simply downloading information but not reflecting on it, the output becomes merely a matter of expression rather than a broadening of perception. Similarly, with social media, people keep talking all the time but who is doing the thinking, who is doing the listening? Everybody is saying something and the noise is great but they are not saying much. All of which can have a disproportionate impact on students who are not emotionally strong.

So, when we talk about technology, we should always ask ourselves is this an appropriate technology? Do we really need it? In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic has clarified the reality of the benefits and drawbacks of technology. For example, regardless of the prevalence of cellphones, about 60% of the population are not connected, which has meant that the so-called advantages of remote learning which have been much touted as an effective response to lockdown have been limited. The sophistication of these gadgets is of no use if they cannot connect. In Malaysia, there have been cases of students climbing trees in search of a signal for their cellphones. But what is the use of technology that requires us to return to the trees?

Interestingly though this addiction to cellphones is not universal. One global study found 70% of Malaysians said they would not be able to pass a day without looking at their cellphones². Similarly, in India the proportion was 68%. But only 33% of Germans and 25% of Japanese people felt this way

² [Limelight-Networks-State-of-Digital-Lifestyles-Report.pdf \(malaysianwireless.com\)](#)

So, I asked a Japanese friend how it was that he and his peers were not that dependent on communications technologies. He replied: “For us, technology is a kind of an ‘it’. When I need it, I use it. If I do not need it, I put it away.” So, I went back and told my students this with a bit of reinterpretation. I said: “To the Japanese your cellphone is like a toilet. When you want to use it, you go. When you are finished, you leave. But for Malaysians, we stay in the toilet whether we need it or not because it is part of our lives.”

So, the issue is to find the appropriateness of any particular technology – to which as a former science student, I am quite sensitive given that there is a history of large firms dumping their technology on consumers in the developing world regardless of how functional it may be or how long it may last without spare parts.

Again, by contrast with India’s and Malaysia’s addiction to cellphones, Microsoft tycoon Bill Gates recently revealed that his son was only introduced to ICT technology at the age of 14. He said he wanted his son to develop his own creative thinking first.

In general, I worry because I think technology could be another apparatus for colonialism. The soft power comes in the kind of things that are read and which shape the mind. And I worry about that.

Odora Hoppers: How can African leaders and vice-chancellors avoid the trap of colonial thinking?

Dzul Razak: This issue is addressed in the volume *Decolonising the University: The Emerging Quest for Non-Eurocentric Paradigms* which emerged from a conference on the issue held in Penang, Malaysia, in June 2011. The question being: How deep are we in this trap and how do we get out? For example, even the Mercator projection of the world which forms the basis of most maps of the world is a trap. Under this projection, Greenland is bigger than Mexico and almost equivalent in size to Africa. Mercator gives the clear impression that they are bigger than us. (In this context, I should also note that, according to Muslim tradition, this map is also the wrong way up – the southern hemisphere should be on the top.)

However, in the present moment, particularly in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, there is increasing awareness of such distortions and the need to revamp the whole education system from the perspective of local needs and local contexts. In this regard, we must have the courage to resist models for development which are against our interests and oppose intellectual and political critiques that seek to bring us to heel.

For example, politicians have a tendency to criticise their domestic higher education models and tell their local universities to follow a new path, such as that trodden by a particular university in the West. But, in response, I say: “You want me to change and say I need to follow somebody else. But that is not change, it is just following somebody.” The key concern must be to produce an understanding of what is it we want to do, rather than mimicking other models which are of no actual use.

Similarly, in relation to the calls for decolonisation, it has been said that much of Malaysia was effectively discovered by Captain Francis Light in 1700s, although people had been continuously occupying the land long before he arrived. In fact, we discovered him, he did not discover us.

Odora Hoppers: In other words, your vision is to make sense of decolonisation as a basis for deepening the higher education system, maybe leading to sustainability. Because if we sow a seed on a rock, it will not be sustainable. Is that not so?

Dzul Razak: Yes, and the seed must be compatible with the soil. Sometimes I will sow and put in some seed, but it will never grow because it is not compatible. And this is what has been happening. We have been taking the seeds from the West, but our soil is different so that the seed will never grow. And if it does grow, it will be stunted. But I should also make it clear that we are not saying that everything in the West is bad – or that everything in the East or the South is bad. The question is one of balance when we talk about sustainability – how to bring balance. How do you balance the two so that we can have the best of both worlds?

Odora Hoppers: I wonder whether I have covered everything that you needed to tell me, or not?

Dzul Razak: Although it will be difficult to make the required change, I think people are beginning to accept that the present idea of education is no longer really concerned with authentic education. Chomsky also has argued that education today is a factory. That people are not being trained to think, but merely to deliver what has been prescribed them.

In an effort to address this, IIUM has just revised its curriculum so that every student must undertake a course which is about the community with which they must be able to work at the end of the day and which they must show they are able to transform. So, in other words, it is not enough for the students to learn about poverty in an air-conditioned library, they must go there and get their hands dirty, and sweat and learn something from the community.

And there is much to learn. For example, the university recently came across a series of 18 puzzles developed by an indigenous community in Malaysia's jungles. This community teach these puzzles to their children from the age of six and through adolescence until they can solve them all. These puzzles, these contraptions, which many academics cannot actually solve, are deployed by the indigenous community to create a kind of divergent, creative thinking. Because they say in the jungle the solution when you meet a snake and when you meet a tiger are not the same (although for a modern person the answer in both cases would be to run). The idea is that when the children who live in the jungle meet with some potential calamity, they should be able to find a solution appropriate for that situation and make a decision and act accordingly. So important are these puzzles, young men cannot marry unless they have mastered them. Thus, they have become a means of measuring a person's maturity.

So, I have now brought these things to the university to teach the students, who struggle to solve them – the lesson being that there is much to learn from indigenous communities who have developed powerful ways of thinking and who, unlike most of the students, are not easily distracted but are patient enough to reflect, learn and meditate. In this way, the goal is to restore some of the old virtues that have been lost and become better human beings as a result.

So, when I talk about the inside-out process, about trying to train ourselves, there is great emphasis on meditation and reflection as aspects of a new kind of education which fosters balanced human beings rather than just developing skills for a particular use.