UNDERSTANDING REFORM AND
THE UNIVERSITI SA S MALAYSIA AGENDA
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Discussion and Critique

James Campbell
CONTENTS

Foreword vii
Preface ix

1 Introduction 1

2 Why APEX? 4

3 Socio-economic Context 11
   3.1 Competitive advantage and sustainability 17
   3.2 Differentiation, positional advantage: The Blue Ocean 24

4 Cultural-pedagogical Context 28
   4.1 USM and the challenge of isomorphism 33
   4.2 Communitarian values and educational change 35
   4.3 Creativity, sustainability, and the social ethical aims of a knowledge economy 39

5 Dare We Take the Risk? 51

6 Conclusion: Sustainability as the Primary Context 56

References 61
Index 73
FOREWORD

The APEX INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSE SERIES is an attempt by the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) to bring together new thinking on a wide range of topics of interest to the campus community and the general public in the country and also to readers abroad on the university’s transformational journey into becoming an APEX University.

Under the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) initiative, USM was accorded the APEX status in September 2008. This is based on the theme, Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow that USM (in 2008) put forward as a lead in articulating a vision of a university of the future, as an outcome of a scenario planning that USM carried out in 2005–2006. Since then, a Transformation Plan was prepared to guide the implementation process so as to enable changes to be effected at several levels including autonomy and accountability, talent management, sustainability, and global relevance. The introduction of this monograph series will contribute towards enriching the literature on transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow, and further enlightening the deeper search for a university of the future.

This joint effort by Centre for Policy Research and International Studies (CenPRIS) and Penerbit USM (The USM Press) will hopefully broaden the discourse on the APEX initiative and narrow the gap that exist in supporting the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development. We would like to invite contributors who are keen in advancing awareness towards this goal in concert with other sustainability-led global agenda.
Our sincere congratulations goes to Dr. James Campbell who leads in this pioneering series by providing in-depth aspects of intellectual underpinnings to the APEX process and aspirations as part of a challenging transformational journey.

May the journey be a rewarding and memorable one.

Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, *Professor Tan Sri Dato’*  
Vice Chancellor  
Universiti Sains Malaysia
PREFACE

The reform agenda of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) under the APEX framework constitutes a radical revision and engagement with the issue of being a world class university. Such a transformation entails engaging with and articulating how USM can truly transform itself and success in a global context that is competitive and often unequal. Redefining excellence in the context of USM’s APEX strategy entails rethinking the social, economic, and cultural context of higher education in the Malaysian environment. Business unusual needs thinking that is philosophically and theoretically innovative and informed. The APEX Intellectual Discourse Series is an effort to provide this intellectual ferment. In so doing, the monograph series seeks to engage the complex and dynamic problems of how ‘business unusual’ can be understood and engaged. Such an engagement needs to investigate the opportunities presented by moving into the Blue Ocean market space, but also needs to understand the threats posed by asymmetric inequality, and cultural and economic marginalization that characterize contemporary higher education within current globalization. Rearticulating Malaysian higher education as a positional good in the context of opening up new markets and engaging with the issue of sustainability and cultural empowerment is of critical importance. Innovative thinking needs to occur in how we frame our concepts of the higher education market and the relationship of this to Malaysian higher educational objectives. Creativity in our students and our institutions needs to be understood as a social attribute and the nature of how we understand the social interactions and relationships in higher education relates strongly to how we can reposition higher education to truly engage the 21st century.
Without a name, how shall we differentiate
Between sand, stone, earth and wood?

Sand needs no name
Stone requests for no name
Earth does not ask for a name
Wood knows not its name
These are problems for human beings
Who crave names.

What difference would it make if we change names
Wood becomes stone, stone becomes sand and sand becomes earth?

Nothing significant will happen

Wood will still remain wood, stone still stone, sand
still sand and earth still earth,

It’s human beings who are faced with a problem
Their understanding blurs

Not being able to differentiate between a name and a thing.

Baharuddin Zainal (Baha Zain 2008)
INTRODUCTION
APEX status for the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) provides us with a critical problem. Can we differentiate between a name and a thing? What exactly is the meaning of a sustainable university within the framework of APEX status? How do we know we have actually achieved APEX practice and sustainability in more than just words? The APEX Intellectual Discourse Series is an attempt to engage with this problem by beginning the long path of investigating, articulating, and debating the philosophical, theoretical, and contextual issues that frame USM’s programme of a sustainable university within the context of APEX status. The monograph series is not meant to be a definitive or all encompassing statement on all that USM’s APEX agenda means and entails.

Rather the monograph series is the beginning of an intellectual journey designed to help articulate and engage with the problems, characteristics, and issues, which inform the USM agenda. The APEX Intellectual Discourse Series currently sets out five basic areas for investigation: globalization, civil society, social capital (trust and risk in organizations), religion in the public sphere and the role of Islam, and finally educational theory and the knowledge economy. These areas of investigation are by no means definitive and are a beginning to establishing theoretical and philosophical contextualization to USM’s sustainability project. Other areas of investigation and elaboration shall follow.

Not only is the APEX Intellectual Discourse Series aimed at theoretical elaboration of the USM project, it is also hoped that it will provide intellectual stimulus to a set of research initiatives which can form part
of the USM research agenda in engaging with the problems of articulating outcomes for a sustainable future. In this sense, the monograph series is not simply a descriptive engagement with USM’s APEX strategy but also one that engages and discusses USM’s strategy in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, as well as threats.
WHY APEX?
USM received APEX status not simply due to its excellence in teaching and research, but equally important due to the singular and philosophically astute way it has articulated its mission. Mohamed Zawawi captures the essence of the APEX vision and how it differs from conventional approaches to the role of the university with his observation that, “Apex is about accelerated change. It is not about business as usual but business unusual. We seek new and exciting ideas” (Chapman and Kaur 2008). Modelled on the German Universities Excellence Initiative, the APEX framework is a profoundly important and decisive initiative for Malaysian higher education and Malaysian national development. In essence, USM’s APEX agenda is based on an optimistic rather than pessimistic view of sustainable development and the chances for Malaysian higher education in the knowledge economy.

Contemporary arguments regarding the commodification of knowledge (Jacob 2003) and the uneven and iniquitous impact of globalization on higher education and national education systems have had their impact on universities in Malaysia (Nair-Venugopal 2006). The need to adequately analyze and engage the contemporary socio-economic environment of higher education is a critical issue for reformers (Delanty 2003). Part of our problem lies in grasping how USM can successfully engage and articulate itself within the current global Kondratiev (the transition to the knowledge society and economy) (Bullena, Fahey, and Kenway 2006; Villaschi 2005).

The current argument with regards to the way knowledge is redefining our world points to the need for USM to adequately engage and reform itself in
our current environment. The knowledge economy paradigm popularized and conceptualized by Freeman et al. reveals the significance of technological growth in driving change and even more saliently the critical importance of national innovation systems as critical to development and economic advancement (Freeman 1987; Freeman, Clark, and Soete 1982; Freeman and Louca 2001; Freeman and Soete 1997).

The fact that USM’s APEX strategy is aimed at being able to be repeated across the higher education sector points to its increased significance as the touchstone of innovation and change in Malaysian higher education (Najua 2008a). The significance and endogenous nature of knowledge and innovation means that knowledge is the key to economic development and central to success (D. Romer 1993; P.M. Romer 1986, 1990, 1994). In this respect, the behaviour and praxis of knowledge works is of critical importance to growth and development. With respect to USM, the forces and changes briefly discussed above put a premium on deciding and rethinking how to teach, reform curriculum, and use technology. All of this is clearly engaged by USM’s APEX strategy.

USM aims to increase and raise rewards over risks through global integration; improve opportunities for Malaysians rather than add to worsening income gaps, engage and encourage consensus rather than conflict, and solicit and develop participation rather than exclusion. These are some of the fundamental goals of USM’s APEX strategy (Najua 2008b; Dzulkifli 2009). These goals are embedded in an overall commitment to the idea of sustainability within contemporary globalization as an alternative to predominant versions of globalization and
higher educational reform that characterize the contemporary era (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2006; Evans 2008). A critical theoretical underpinning of the USM strategic direction is the programme of education for sustainable development. In many respects, USM’s approach which we will discuss below involves an appreciation of the fact that Polanyi (2001) argued, “we need to provide some measure of social solidarity in a market economy rather than all-out, no holds barred competition” (Chowkwanyun 2009, 66).

The important role that public higher education universities can play in setting the agenda and ensuring that values not simply reducible to ‘cost effectiveness’ or ‘speed of return’ are inculcated into Malaysian society. This is especially important given the rapid spread of private higher educational institutions, which are having a significant effect on the Malaysian higher education scene (Sohail 2003). Ensuring and building upon the ethical authority that APEX gives USM is a significant part of the USM project and represents a critical issue for the status of public universities in Malaysia and the central role they play in ‘moral governance’. Historically, universities in Malaysia have served national goals of educational inclusion and development (Anuwar 2005). Molly Lee captures the aims of the Malaysian government vis-à-vis higher education:

Higher education in Malaysia has undergone massive expansion due to ever increasing social demand which is partly brought about by the democratisation of secondary education and the growing affluence of the Malaysian society. Tertiary education is often perceived by the state as an avenue for social mobility, an instrument for human capital development and economic growth, as well as a vehicle to promote national
identity and unity. Since the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1970, the state has viewed access to higher education as a means to restructure the Malaysian society by eliminating the identification of ethnic community with economic functions (Lee 2004, 35).

Faced with a set of interrelated asymmetric crisis, the direction of USM is set towards a fundamental engagement with basic reform and change (Carnoy 1977; Carnoy and Levin 1976; Sen 1999, 2000). Asymmetric crises which characterize the contemporary globalized environment include: with respect to values, social equity versus selfishness; in regards to resources, waste versus conservation; and finally with regards to technological development, responsive and socially responsible development versus grandiose and extravagant development (Stiglitz 2003, 2005). All of these are made in the context of constraints on decision making. These constraints which characterize the nature and limitations on our ability to reason include systems complexity, information uncertainty; the need for trade offs between diverse objectives, and dealing with conflicting and contending interest groups. The difficulties of reform are in short significant; the consequences of failure however are far worse. According to Nancy Birdsall, the problems of globalization are as follows:

- The market works; in the global market game, those without the right training and equipment inevitably lose;
- the market fails; in the global economy, negative externalities raise new costs for the vulnerable and compound the risks faced by the already weak and disadvantaged;
• in the global game, economic power matters more than ever across countries; it is natural that the rich and powerful can influence the design and implementation of global rules to their own advantage (Birdsall 2002, 8).

These problems pose significant threats to the USM’s APEX strategy. Conversely, at least in part the problems outlined above are motivation for USM’s strategy as well. The opportunity of APEX, derived in part from the strength of its leadership and backing by the Malaysian state, faces very real threats from asymmetric globalization (Bamyeh 2000; Burbules and Torres 2000; Han 2003; Held and McGrew 2000; Khor 2000; Mittelman 2000; Walby 2000). This threat can be accentuated if USM itself does not engage with its direction honestly and if as an institution, there is no ‘buy in’. This potential weakness would empower and embolden the already existing threats to the strategy outlined in part above.

One of the first issues to be resolved in such an endeavour is to try to grasp what makes the USM ‘project’ different, and why it constitutes such a significant moment in Malaysian national development. Several questions present themselves: Is the sustainable university project simply understood within the framework of national development? Is it a peripheral project? Is it transnational? Is it local or global? Is it regional? These questions may seem esoteric, or even perhaps irrelevant.

Yet the nature of global change, the rapidity of communications, the growth of the knowledge economy and challenges to the authority of the state, the overwhelming influence of the market,
and the growth of global civil society all contribute to the need to rearticulate the role and direction of Malaysian universities (Lee 2004). Compounding these pressures is the need for greater access by larger numbers of people in higher education and the need to transform pedagogics, governance structures, and research culture within such an environment.

Finally as a methodological point with regards to how we view educational reform and its results. One of the problems with judging education reforms and their results is when we apply closed system analysis to institutions that are open-ended or in Aristotelian terms when we indulge over precision, which is a sign of our inability to grasp the tension between knowledge and politics (Davies 1996; Salkever 1981). This issue must be noted since demands for absolute exactitude in projects such as university reform are by their nature demands for the impossible. Martin Rudner’s Aristotelian observation with respect to this is pertinent:

It is often convenient to portray educational trends by devising input-output tabulations for particular denominators, or variables, e.g. enrolments, expenditures, etc. However, a degree of caution must be exercised in their interpretation, lest logical fallacies intrude through the application of ‘closed’ systems analysis to essentially ‘open’ institutions like education. Education cannot be logically isolated from the context of society, from external normative and social influences (Rudner 1977, 23).
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT
The following discussion will take a deeper look at some of the issues and contextual environment for USM’s strategic position. This will provide us with a better idea of the complexity of some of the issues that face us and by inference the complexity of issues that will animate the monograph series. Globally, higher education “is itself being transformed on both sides of the economy/culture symbiosis” (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 7). The following discussion focuses on the socio-economic side of this symbiosis.

Malaysian social and economic policies are dominated by three fundamental issues. First, the amelioration of ‘horizontal’ inequality within Malaysia. Second, redressing ‘vertical’ inequality between Malaysia and the developed world. Finally, protecting Malaysia’s cultural and environmental sustainability.

Over the past 30 years, Malaysia’s efforts at resolving horizontal inequality through programmes such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and engaging vertical inequality through rapid economic development have provided a model for both social reform and economic growth which is singular in its achievements. The ‘shackling’ of Malaysia to a colonial legacy characterized by an “ethnic division of labour” (Abraham 1997, 249) and horizontal inequality in Malaysian society (Stewart 2002) as well as an underdeveloped commodity based economy and hence vertical inequality in global terms provided the Malaysian polity with critical problems (Brown 1997). These problems are now compounded by severe environmental degradation and a sense that Malaysia’s culture and environment are increasingly threatened.
These tensions and the efforts to engage and redress them constitute the essential architecture of Malaysian national development. Frances Stewart reminds us that addressing horizontal inequality is critical to addressing the needs of social stability and development (Stewart and Fitzgerald 2001). Higher education plays a critical role in Malaysian national development and in addressing horizontal inequality in Malaysian society (Hoong 1971, 1973). At the same time, Malaysian national development and how Malaysian higher education is placed in the contemporary global environment is also inhibited by vertical disadvantage between nations.

Simon Marginson and Marijk van der Wende captures the problems of how vertical disadvantage manifests in the contemporary higher educational scene. They points out that, “Vertical differences are differences in capacities, resources and status” (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 17). Indeed, according to Marginson, “global flows of knowledge, people and finance for tertiary education are not uniform or multi-directional – often they are one-way or largely one-way and dominated by the stronger countries and institutions, particularly in the Anglophone bloc and most of all the United States” (Marginson 2008, 1–2).

The differences in capacities and status are in some measure results of asymmetric global inequalities rather than their cause. This one-way nature of the relationship in the global knowledge economy and between higher educational institutions points to the salient issue of global vertical disadvantage that characterizes the contemporary environment. Vertical disadvantage and asymmetric power between nations
and educational systems and institutions in a global sense compound efforts at addressing horizontal inequalities within developing nations.

Firstly, globalization in higher education is in large measure constituted by global flows of information, people, and money (Bell 1974, 1976). While the growth of ICT and the ease of global travel have made access to information more accessible, the nature of the ‘gravitational’ pull of higher educational institutions: who gets the brains in the brain drain, where philanthropic funding goes, and who owns information is largely over-determined by prevailing hegemonies in the global capitalist environment.

In other words, the increased communication flows and changes in temporal and spatial relations which are the result of globalization and its acceleration through ICT are articulated through uneven and unequal power relations which constrain and maintain centres of power and privilege despite the pretence to inclusiveness that globalization offers. Consider for example the vast difference in reaction to capital flows and the flow of human beings in the current global environment. Again, Marginson and van der Wende captures the dynamics well:

Global flows in higher education are affected by global relations of power. Global traffic often flows in a reciprocal fashion, benefiting some nations and institutions more than others. For example, strong nations and hegemonic research universities have a gravitational power of attraction, pulling towards them crossborder flows of faculty talent and doctoral students, tuition fees and research and philanthropic funding. In weaker systems global brain circulation becomes a brain drain transferring
Theoretically, we face several critical tensions. Firstly, given the inequality of resources and vertical inequalities that exist between Malaysian universities and metropolitan nations, the capacity to compete and gain a foothold against entrenched interests, cultural, and economic power means that playing the traditional game for Malaysian universities and doing well in it is extremely difficult. Secondly, a kind of ethical blindness to the way that contemporary neo-liberal globalization excludes and marginalizes large sections of the global community.

Given these two fundamental issues: (a) the global inequality that characterizes the global higher educational environment and (b) the ethical blindness that characterizes current ways in which status is understood in globalized neo-liberal higher education discourse, there is a need for radical rethinking. How do we engage competitive advantage in an ethically sustainable fashion for universities in Malaysia? USM’s approach of a sustainability strategy as an answer to this question is unique and yet its basic approach is informed by sound theory and realistic assessments.

Contemporary neo-liberal economic theory and the instrumental rationality that informs it divides ethical considerations off from competitive considerations and objectifies current structures of excellence. By seeking to ground, the university mission in a commitment to sustainability USM is not simply embarking on an ‘idealistic’ exercise or a quixotic tilting at windmills. This point needs critical
elaboration since grasping the USM project hinges on understanding the relationship between ethical commitment, and a renewed and sophisticated reformulation of competitive advantage in the higher education sector.

Put simply and briefly, contemporary neo-classical and neo-liberal economic modelling rests upon the notion of *homo-economicus* or economic man whose choices are normatively unproblematic and individualized. The radical disconnect between ‘choice’ and ethical values is a foundation stone of neo-liberal economics. The reconnect between competition and ethics, which is the core driver of USM’s sustainability project, provides a critical way to rethink the role of higher education and to ensure renewal and growth.

Participation in a global market economy has produced tensions between the market and national interest. Market forces and globalization as realized through the ascendancy of neo-liberalism puts pressure on national goals such as redressing horizontal inequality in Malaysia. These pressures therefore constitute real pressure on Malaysian higher educational institutions in their efforts to help ameliorate and overcome disadvantage based on horizontal inequality and other forms of disadvantage in Malaysian society. These pressures in essence are significant threats to the goals of USM’s APEX strategy since they mitigate the ethical aims and moral project that USM hopes both to articulate and inspire.

Yet given this, how then does an institution such as USM compete effectively and perform in an environment characterized above through asymmetric inequalities? How does USM through its APEX
strategy engage with and challenge totalizing forms of globalization, maintain national integrity, shared values, and pursue sustainability without conceding competitive advantage? These issues animate the philosophical and strategic issues that USM faces in moving towards its goals and articulating its strategic direction.

In short, USM’s APEX strategy entails engaging with a central binary informing asymmetric inequality at a global level: the central tension between a global market based ideology and countervailing local, social, and national interests. How does USM engage the global market and maintain social dignity and position? Can USM overcome the threats posed by neo-liberal globalization and knowledge economy to engage the opportunities of the knowledge society?

3.1 Competitive Advantage and Sustainability

One critical binary that frames how we analyze and engage the problems of APEX and USM’s strategic position is between sustainability and competitive advantage as a focus of development. Michael Porter aptly theorizes the problem of competitive advantage within global capitalism (Porter 1998). Both Peter Drucker and Michael Porter, “emphasise the importance of the economics and productivity of knowledge as the basis for national competition within the international marketplace” (Peters 2001, 1). Lester Thurow also shares this emphasis on the importance of knowledge. According to Thurow, “Today knowledge and skills now stand alone as the only source of comparative advantage. They have become the key ingredient in the late twentieth
century’s location of economic activity” (Peters 2001, 1; Thurow 1996).

Contemporary neo-liberal theories of public choice and human capital combined with new theories of public management are critically driving change in higher education around the world (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Giroux 2002; Sergiovanni 1999). Critics of the way competitive advantage is framed within neo-liberal understandings of the role of the university in Malaysian society point out that ‘excellence’ is often articulated by the powerful in terms that exclude and marginalize developing countries (Najua 2008b). Competition in such an environment is often aimed at securing success in terms and objectives that are not universally shared. Is USM’s APEX strategy an effort to walk away from competitive advantage? Alternatively, is it an effort to redefine world class and hence redefine its mission against benchmarks and objectives that are self-selected rather than selected for it?

Two basic aspects characterize an ability to maintain and sustain competitive advantage in the current globally competitive environment. Firstly, there is ‘cost advantage’ and secondly, ‘differential advantage’. Economically, Malaysia has historically been able to succeed in cost advantage due to its low labour costs. This advantage no longer holds. In educational terms, cost advantage has not translated successfully into educational competitive advantage. Largely this is because attraction of students to educational institutions in a global environment is necessary to differentiate and position educational institutions in ways that attract status and acclaim. Cost in itself is not enough.
What does this mean for Malaysian higher education and USM’s APEX strategy? Essentially, the problem Malaysian educational institutions have is how to ‘differentiate’ and reposition themselves to reclaim status and rank in a competitive and globalized environment. However, saying this begs more questions than it addresses. If cost advantage is not sufficient to reposition Malaysian higher education then how does Malaysia engage and differentiate itself in higher education in a globalized environment? How does Malaysia (and USM through its APEX strategy) then achieve the following goals of the National Mission?

- Moving the economy up the value chain.
- Raising the capacity for knowledge and innovation to nurture a first-class mentality.
- Addressing persistent socio-economic inequalities constructively and productively.
- Improving Malaysians’ quality of life and ensuring its sustainability.
- Strengthening institutional and implementation capacities (Government of Malaysia 2006, 14–18).

If we look at the Malaysian Government’s Strategic Higher Education Action Plan, we can see a solid recognition by Malaysia’s policy making elite of the connection between human capital, education, and competitive advantage. According to the plan, “Top-class human capital is essential to promote economic growth, trigger industrial development and explore new areas of research that can sustain a nation’s competitive advantage over others” (Ministry of Higher Education 2007, 37). The centrality of higher education to competitive advantage and the establishment of excellence and human capital are critical for Malaysia’s economic, cultural, and
social growth. It is also fundamentally important for Malaysia’s social, cultural, and political stability. This fundamental fact is not lost on policy makers. Faizah Ibrahim and Lucia Sai Gearn Quek captures the issue succinctly:

Malaysia’s ability to carve out significant competitive advantage in certain industries lies in the people factor, requiring them to attain a high level of competence and skills. Essentially, it is through education and training that Malaysia can be prepared to face the challenges of this new century (Faizah and Quek 2007, 9).

Malaysia’s need to reengage and rethink how to maintain ‘competitive advantage’ is a central and critical component of Malaysian higher educational reform. Fusing together the concepts of sustainability and competitive advantage may be strange to some people. Nonetheless, the need to re-theorize what competitive advantage means in the context of sustainability is a prescient issue. Arguably, the USM strategy is an attempt to move beyond the values of competition towards collaboration. This kind of emphasis certainly captures and represents the critical value orientation of USM. For some, the notion of competitive advantage is rooted in neo-liberalism and thus at odds with the USM APEX agenda.

Nonetheless, USM cannot avoid engaging with the issue of how to compete and succeed in a global and competitive higher educational environment. In this sense, USM needs to work with the world to change it. In fact, USM’s APEX strategy is an excellent example of leveraging from its hidden strengths to pursue opportunities and overcome the way its current position is articulated as a weakness. In other
words, a redefinition of excellence and a rethink concerning the capacities and capabilities of USM can if done intelligently lead to a renewed and innovative understanding of how USM can in fact differentiate to gain positional advantage in the higher education environment.

Fundamentally, the logical and philosophical conundrum that USM faces in its APEX strategy is precisely overcoming what Clarke, Islam, and Sheehan suggest is the new ‘impossibility theorem’: the contradiction between sustainability and development (Clarke, Islam, and Sheehan 2002, 90). The key philosophical question that animates the APEX strategy is to what extent the development of competitive advantage in education correlates with the values and principles of sustainability. This fundamental question animates the philosophical issue at stake. Is the APEX strategy of sustainability and development through competitive advantage attainable, or do these aims constitute a paradox and mutual exclusivity that needs to be addressed?

Can the commitment of USM to collaborative values and sustainability be squared with the need for it to forge a competitive and robust higher education footprint? The answer to this question is a resounding ‘Yes’ yet theoretically conceptualizing how this can be done is complex and challenging. Not only are Malaysian institutions now concerned with issues of social justice, problems of horizontal inequality within Malaysian society, and social and political stability, now this is compounded further by the issue of sustainability as well as the maintenance of cultural dignity. Pressures on Malaysian higher educational institutions are therefore profound and difficult. Interestingly there does appear to be a common root...
for these issues, which may provide us with a chance to articulate a unified theoretical perspective.

Simone Borghesi and Alessandro Vercelli argue that, "worries for inequality, poverty and environmental degradation have a common root to the extent that each of them violates the crucial ethical principle of equal ex ante opportunities for each citizen" (Borghesi and Vercelli 2001, 3). This common root provides us with a way to understand the direction of USM not as something utterly novel or at odds with Malaysian national aspirations but rather as a rearticulation and elaboration of these aspirations through higher education in a situation of asymmetric inequality, cultural marginalization compounded by environmental destruction and catastrophe.

The process of sustainability requires new thinking and a rebalancing of economy, society, and environment. However, it is more than that as well. The process of sustainability requires a rethinking about how economy, environment, and society are constituted not simply the regulative relations between them. The impact of this on education is significant. In terms of higher education, all of this poses significant problems. Global changes, the growth and centrality of the knowledge economy, globalized communication, the rapidity of economic integration, the growth of global civil society, the problem of values, beliefs in an increasingly consumer oriented global culture, and the essential overarching need to engage the issue of sustainability are all pushing Malaysian policy makers to rethink Malaysia’s education mission.

Sustainability as a direction for USM must be considered in regards to how it is articulated. Is
sustainability top down imposition? Is its meaning set without recourse to debate and discussion by all? This is a critical question. If we view the philosophy of sustainability as just one, more discourse articulated by the dominant and imposed on the powerless, then it runs the risk of manifesting as just one more example of hegemonic power imposing a moral vision on developing nations and societies. This however is not how USM is articulating sustainability. Recognizing this difference between sustainability as authoritarian stasis oriented philosophy and praxis and sustainability as culturally informed pluralistic and reflexive practice is critical in understanding the essential way USM is engaging sustainability. Neo-liberal critics of sustainability doubt the innovative and dynamic potential of sustainability precisely because they associate it with stasis and authoritarian restrictions on creativity (Dator 1998; Postrel 1998).

How competitive advantage is articulated is deeply contentious, nonetheless, its salience in a successful sustainability strategy for USM cannot be underestimated. Interestingly, pursuing sustainability as a strategy may in fact provides USM with significant market advantage. The threat to a sustainability strategy in USM lies in perceptions that it is counter to development and an ethos of rigorous engagement with creating opportunity. This threat if accepted uncritically masks very real opportunities that can flow from a commitment to sustainability as an enhanced rather than constrained enhancement of opportunity and engagement. The strength of USM’s commitments needs therefore, clear articulation and presentation if it is not to be overwhelmed by neo-liberal critique rooted in misunderstanding and misrepresentation.
We have as it were two basic aims in USM’s APEX strategy. First we have the pursuit of competitive advantage and educational development, and secondly, the pursuit of sustainability and sustainability ethics. For example, by connecting USM to the central and defining ethical, economic, and political problem that will shape the 21st century, USM places itself at the cutting edge of focusing itself on helping engage and solve problems that will define the next millennium. Such a repositioning, differentiation, and refocus aims to open up new markets and new foci for university engagement, research, and teaching.

In other words, the way USM reformulates and reengages competitive advantage is now driven by an engagement with sustainability and will provide USM with a framework for global engagement that is both ethically defensible as well as strategically competitive. Such an approach reworks the traditional neo-liberal division between ethics and competition by tying USM to resolving and engaging with the single most important ethical and practical problem that faces the world today and for the next millennium: sustainability.

3.2 Differentiation, Positional Advantage: The Blue Ocean

The critical model, which formulates this strategy, is the Blue Ocean metaphor. Blue Ocean strategy provides a bridge between the discourse of traditional business strategy and the need to reposition and differentiate USM’s strategic direction from the current neo-liberal orthodoxy. Blue Ocean provides a framework, which enables us to conceptualize how
business as usual is to be transformed as ‘business unusual’. According to the strategic direction of USM:

USM-APEX...will undertake a strategy to innovate to promote new “markets” for knowledge by introducing sustainability-led education through creating new demands which focus on the needs of the masses at the bottom of the pyramid. Following the blue ocean strategy, USM will take steps to transform itself by eliminating or reducing bureaucracy, reducing the funding gap, wastages and damages, whilst raising the global agenda, autonomy and accountability, quality and future relevance, creating “people-led” local solutions for global problem, thus creating sustainability (USM 2008, 19).

The use of Blue Ocean theory provides us with a path to rearticulate the way USM can reposition itself within current globalization. According to USM’s new direction, “Sustainability in higher education, for all intends and purposes, is a blue ocean opportunity” (USM 2008, 18). Blue Ocean strategy allows USM to “realign itself in the transformation process to move into uncharted space and untapped market. This allows the university to grow and innovate untainted by competition, through the creation of new demands by introducing new value innovation and opportunities” (Ramli and Dzulkifli 2008; USM 2008, 19). The difference between Red Oceans and Blue Ocean strategy is summarized as:

Red oceans represent all the industries in existence today. This is the known market space. Blue oceans denote all the industries not in existence today. This is the unknown market space. In the red oceans, industry boundaries are defined and accepted, and the competitive rules of the game are known. Here, companies
try to outperform their rivals to grab a greater share of existing demand. As the market space gets crowded, prospects for profits and growth are reduced. Products become commodities, and cutthroat competition turns the red ocean bloody. Blue oceans, in contrast, are defined by untapped market space, demand creation, and the opportunity for highly profitable growth. Although some blue oceans are created well beyond existing industry boundaries, most are created from within red oceans by expanding existing industry boundaries, as Cirque du Soleil did. In blue oceans, competition is irrelevant because the rules of the game are waiting to be set (Kim and Mauborgne 2005, 4).

What then are some of the critical areas of differentiation that can characterize the USM approach to globalized competition and sustainability? Part of the USM approach to sustainability and ensuring competitive advantage lies in its reformulation of the role of a university in civil society as well as recognizing USM’s important contribution that can be made to diverse public spheres within global modernity. If USM is truly to engage with and develop a sustainability programme in keeping with the revised approach to the market outlined in the Blue Ocean strategy, then apart of the realignment relies on redefining where its market lies. In other words, opening up new markets for research and learning requires USM to reformulate who their ‘customers’ are. The essential strategy is captured by its commitment to ‘non-customers’. How does USM reach out to ‘powerful commonalities in what buyers value’ and reach the non-customers? (Kim and Mauborgne 2005, 20).
Where do we find our new ‘non-customers’? How do we align our aims with the growing actual needs of the 21st century? The USM strategy is deceptively simple. We must look forward to where the key demands and untapped opportunities lie for universities in the new millennium. To do this requires a realignment and reassessment of priorities and where we engage. One significant opening for USM lies in encouraging and expanding its involvement in local and global civil society (Pye 2001; Saravanamuttu 2001; Walzer 1995; Weiss 2006).

The engagement with people-led, local solutions to global problems and an ethical commitment to ameliorating the disadvantage of the bottom billions involves quintessentially a renewed involvement with civil society. Such involvement and commitment to engaging research in solving real and prescient problems that characterize social and environmental degradation and injustice entails USM engaging with local agendas in the service of addressing global issues. The importance of public awareness and support for sustainability necessitates engaging with and helping to solve the problems that are experienced by the public in a direct and verifiable way. Engaging with civil society and reworking our understandings of who a university engages with and how it does this is central not simply to the ethical programme of USM but also to its efforts at reengaging new markets and opportunities.
4

CULTURAL-PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT
The second part of the higher education symbiosis is culture. USM’s commitment to sustainability and social justice is as much cultural as economic and its cultural mission is central to its APEX agenda. While Malaysia’s record of economic development coupled with social stability, educational growth, and achievement is the envy of many nations, it faces a new set of problems, contradictions, and issues which now necessitate new directions and ‘business unusual’ from its education sector. Nowhere is this more prescient and necessary than in the higher education sector. What does this mean?

The basic problem we face in engaging globalization is that we need to engage globalization at the same time as maintaining and elaborating distinctive national identity and culture and the values that define the best of this culture. This effort is not simply the reserve of humanities scholars but significant for all USM’s scholastic community. We have to understand that sustaining humane values and maintaining cultural respect while at the same time, as engaging globally requires new thinking. This new thinking is captured by the principles of sustainability. Sustainability includes but is not limited to environmental sustainability. The reason for this essentially boils down to the essential fact that the problems of human survival boil down to problems of human values and priorities.

The role of education in sustaining national cultures and self-respect is very much a central problem of pedagogy. Thomas Popkewitz reminds us that much of what passes for globalization is presented as a kind of <i>fait accompli</i> and is often presented ahistorically (Awad 2007). In other words, the extent to which
the dominant discursive paradigm of globalization presents itself as beyond historical interrogation or disagreement acts as an impediment to ideas of alternative globalization, and hence alternative strategic directions for higher education. This issue is especially acute since higher education is a critical modernizing institution.

Hence, how higher educational institutions interpret what it means to engage the knowledge economy, cultural dignity, and the phenomenon of globalization will help determining in large measure how globalization and the normative directions of Malaysian society are set and articulated (Marginson 2004). Anja P. Jakobi captures the underpinning assumptions that inform the way globalization and the knowledge society in education is framed both as a unifying concept within modernization as well as a singular non-pluralistic framework. According to Jakobi:

> The knowledge society is rarely assumed to have a plural. Instead, countries tend to see themselves as part of one development towards such a society, which is, by principal, not restricted to particular countries but tends to encompass the whole world (Jakobi 2007, 39).

How do we approach and theorize USM’s APEX strategy in relation to globalization of education? The essential issue in front of USM as it translates and articulates the meaning of APEX is how to compete in a world where cultural and economic power is overly centralized in the ‘North’, for example Europe, and more particularly the United States. Malaysian policy makers are also well aware of the tensions and problems associated with rampant
consumer mentality and possessive individualism that characterize some of the cultural excesses of contemporary globalization. Contemporary hierarchies of knowledge are themselves practices of hegemony as understood by Gramsci. They exclude based on unequal power, implicit though rarely expressed prejudices, and assumptions about value that are Eurocentric and exclusionary (Babic 2007; Burbules and Torres 2000; Guehenno 1999; Manicas 2007; Merrouche 2006; Phillipson 2009; Ritzer 2004; Sites 2000; Stiglitz 2005; Tomlinson 1997).

Is there truly as socially just and equitable free flow of knowledge in conditions of globalization? What does this mean given our understanding of knowledge as culturally and informed, and socially interactive? The question that must be asked, to what extent the knowledge of peripheral nations and peoples is respected and seen as equal worth in current conditions of globalization? How does Malaysia obtain competitive advantage in higher education when it faced global asymmetry of economic power, cultural respect, and social understanding? What do we do when the promise of globalization and radically individualistic culture is both exclusionary and unevenly distributed among the world’s peoples? (Peters 2001).

Geoffrey Alderman points out that, “to the extent that governments which fund national universities do themselves recognize the cultural responsibilities of higher education, the globalization of the university poses further threats, in that students risk being exposed to cultural norms which may be at variance with those desired by national governments” (Alderman 2001, 49). In short, the socio-economic
effects of contemporary globalization pose significant opportunities and threats for Malaysian society in general and higher education. The threats include environmental destruction, cultural marginalization, social and economic inequality, and loss of academic status. Nevertheless, what are the opportunities and how can USM leverage of the hidden strengths of Malaysian society and USM’s capacities to overcome the way its identity is currently articulated as weakness? How do Malaysian higher educational institutions compete in a situation where the standard of excellence is defined elsewhere?

If excellence within current neo-liberal globalization is defined in a fashion that reinforces the cultural political and economic privilege of ‘metropolitan’ global powers then how can Malaysian universities compete and succeed in such an environment? Of course, in some specific niche research Malaysian universities are competing and recognized against ‘metropolitan’ standards. However, the key issue is the extent to which Malaysian universities in a more generalized sense can reach this level. Compounding all of this are twin desires of Malaysians for cultural recognition and respect in a globalized environment, where the cultural hegemony of the West is ascendant, as well as a desire to protect and nurture their physical environment.

These threats constitute real problems for USM yet the hidden strengths of USM’s cultural location, commitment, and solid cultural leadership do provide a way to theorize how to ameliorate these threats. Cultural leadership entails recognizing and respecting the national language, literature, and arts as well as enabling students to expand their horizons
through, for example, the learning of languages such as English. Cultural leadership entails both respecting and articulating local cultural artistic expression in all its forms as well as engaging in globalization.

4.1 USM and the Challenge of Isomorphism

Given the asymmetric forces that frame globalization at a cultural level, we need to take a close look at how USM can avoid being swept up in the prevailing neo-liberal hegemony and achieve its goals of ‘alternative globalization’. One critical binary that structures how we approach our analysis is that of cultural dignity and respect of particularity against all encompassing forms of isomorphic globalization and in extremis neo-liberal hegemony. For some countries, their way of dealing with globalization and the trends described above amount to practicing forms of ‘educational borrowing’ and ‘institutional isomorphism’.

Educational borrowing is the process of copying dominant conceptions of educational policy and directions and enacting them locally. The critical issue with respect of this process is to what extent the process takes into account local knowledge and conditions, or to what extent it is a process of cultural imperialist subjugation. Research on organizations has shown that a variety of social, economic, and cultural forces can push institutions towards copying other institutions or becoming more like them over a period.

Institutional isomorphism in higher educational institutions is in large measure an aspect of the way that hegemony articulates itself and produces one
organizational/institutional imaginary that exercised
dominant hegemonic influence. Cibulka reminds us
that, “existing norms, structures, and processes tend
to reassert themselves, even when the regime and
formal structures are changed” (Cibulka 1997, 320).
Many attempts in education to change have been met
with significant isomorphic pressures, which push
towards sameness and conformity to dominant ways
of doing things. Cultural isomorphism underpins
much of this, since it is not simply a matter of
imposition but the way values are picked up and
followed because of their hegemonic status. Hawley
argues that, “Isomorphism is a constraining pressure
that forces one unit in a population to resemble
other units that face the same set of environmental
conditions” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 149).

The APEX strategy of ‘business unusual’ contends
with isomorphic pressures that are coercive,
normative, and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism
results from the political and legal environment. In
the Malaysian case, strong political support for the
USM APEX strategy is of critical importance. This
does come with a sense of irony, for the history of
strong centralized authority and command over
higher education in Malaysia is directly challenged
by the organizational and governance reforms that
APEX initiates.

Nonetheless, increased independence in governance
under APEX is one way of insuring that coercive
isomorphism is more limited. However, this reform
will not necessarily inhibit normative isomorphism
which manifests as the reintroduction of conservative
principles under the guise of professional norms nor
will it necessarily limit mimetic isomorphism which
manifests when uncertainty drives organizations to mimic already existing organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These pressures constitute a real threat to the APEX strategy and must be understood. The way that neo-liberal cultural, managerial, and organizational values can seep back into the organizational structures of USM through isomorphism is clearly an issue.

4.2 Communitarian Values and Educational Change

What then are the cultural resources that can mitigate isomorphism? Paradoxically, it may be the very cultural values of community and responsibility, so derided in neo-liberal theory that provide a bulwark against the hegemony of neo-liberal values and the desire to imitate. USM’s pedagogical culture is infused with ideas of ‘team-effort’ and ‘working together’. These notions are not accidental but rather represent the value system of a communitarian culture quite at odds with contemporary hegemonic possessive individualistic culture (USM 2008, iii, 20; Walzer 1990).

The communitarian values and cultural dispositions that characterize Malaysian society also inform the pedagogical culture of USM. These values are critical to the sustainability agenda and provide a core difference between individualistic values, which propel self-advancement and individual profit, and socially informed values, which take seriously social responsibility. Properly understood and engaged they may also provide a solid foundation to an alternative model of higher education that can withstand the cultural force of neo-liberalism.
Noordin Sopiee captures the values of Malaysian culture in the following observation: “We share a culture which places the stress on working together. As you know, our culture says it is a wonderful thing not to stand out like a sore thumb. It’s a wonderful thing to harmonize, pull together in the same direction” (Jacques 1995, 70). This normative and communitarian culture finds expression in USM’s commitment to sustainability and educational growth. The aim of USM is to produce resilient students who are morally informed, socially aware, creative, innovative, and able to both stand up for their culture and values as well as engage the broader world. Consider for example the following view:

A university worthy of its name should be engaged in protecting and defending as well as promoting humanity to higher ideals. We want our graduates to not only contribute to national and global developments but to become agents of change – in a sustainable way (Dzulkifli 2005, 23–24).

Continuing in the same vein, the USM APEX project entails that students’ “involvement in tertiary education and campus life will not only prepare them as employees with good corporate responsibility but also to be responsible global citizens with strong national-local commitments” (USM 2008, iv). The critical idea is that the products of USM (students) are not simply committed to socially responsible values but also able to adapt to change. The point outlined above boils down to a simple assertion: USM’s APEX strategy is centrally concerned with the problems of maintaining cultural recognition, dignity, and respect as a foundation for educational development and advancement.
Hence, USM’s APEX agenda is a capacity building agenda. One way of providing deeper philosophical depth in articulating this project lies in grasping the USM agenda as an agenda of educational capacity building in the context of socially just goals and cultural respect. In some respects, this approach echoes the kind of argument put forward by scholars such as Amartya Sen who has provided social philosophy with deep accounts of capability deprivation and social exclusion, which must be addressed if societies are to truly call themselves democratic and just.

Sen recognizes that educational social goods are culturally informed and that the realization of human capacities is a key issue in respect of sustainable development and educational growth (Sen 1977, 1999, 2000). This sensibility and commitment both to realizing the capacities and capabilities of students, and on a broader scale the ‘bottom billions’ shows the deep and erudite basis of USM’s strategy with respect to contemporary philosophy and social theory. Charles Hopkins writing for USM’s Healthy Campus Series monographs writes:

Higher education is an important factor in the nation’s policy to deal with global changes. The acceleration of technological, economic and even social and cultural changes requires nurturing a society that can deal with these rapid changes. Citizens must develop the intellectual capability to accept or reject the myriad of changes brought on by media, the globalization of trade, coping with the results of climate change, etc. From a development perspective, a knowledge-based society will be crucial for a nation to compete in the global competition for market share and locational advantages. Of decisive importance
Communitarian values provide a critical strength for USM. The kind of social commitment and community orientation of USM provides Malaysians as well as many others with an important example in a world dominated by neo-liberal hegemony. Developed and adapted properly, the USM example can provide genuine engagement with many diverse publics who yearn for something more than the possessive individualism offered by the ‘Washington consensus’ view of development and modernity. It also represents a rearticulation of an Asian approach to competitive engagement, which is socially derived rather than individually based.

This distinction in forms of economic and social interaction between the individualistic approaches found in neo-liberalism and championed through what Joseph Stiglitz refers to as the ‘Washington consensus’ and the socially responsible approaches found in Asian economies has been ably defined by diverse authors ranging from George C. Lodge to Lester Thurow (Thurow 1992). This approach is in keeping with the aims to ‘balance’ the social and economic aspects of a university’s mission. How then do we reformulate a socially and ethically based competitive strategy for universities within a global framework given the above analysis?
4.3 Creativity, Sustainability, and the Social Ethical Aims of a Knowledge Economy

Another fundamental binary that informs and animates the APEX Intellectual Discourse Series is how to understand the relationship between creativity and engaging students in a globalized knowledge economy against ethical responsibility and national interest. Andy Hargreaves captures the fundamental tensions in the knowledge economy/society dialectic. He writes:

We live in a knowledge economy, a knowledge society. Knowledge economies are stimulated and driven by creativity and ingenuity. Knowledge society schools have to create these qualities, otherwise their people and their nations will be left behind. Like other kinds of capitalism, the knowledge economy is, in Joseph Schumpeter’s terms, a force of creative destruction. It stimulates growth and prosperity, but its relentless pursuit of profit and self-interest also strains and fragments the social order. Along with other public institutions, our schools must therefore also foster the compassion, community and cosmopolitan identity that will offset the knowledge economy’s most destructive effects. The knowledge economy primarily serves the private good. The knowledge society also encompasses the public good. Our schools have to prepare young people for both of them (Hargreaves 2002, 11).

The contradictions and tensions between the values of the knowledge economy with its emphasis on profit and individualism, and the values implicit in a knowledge society based on sharing, collaboration, and community find expression in the tensions and stresses of Malaysian higher education (World
Bank 2007; Bullena, Fahey, and Kenway 2006; Lee 2004; UNESCO 2003). As argued above, the needs of a developing economy and its place in the global production of knowledge animate Malaysian policy. Stresses born from massification, diversification, and trends “towards increased transnational education” (Lee and Healy 2006: 5) all animate the policy arena. We have seen how, commitment to communitarian and socially defensible values are critical for Malaysian public policy. How this relates to the way creativity is pursued and articulated is of critical importance to understanding the relationship between creativity and the national goals of education.

Capacity building in the sense that Amartya Sen uses the term and commitment to addressing disadvantage critically animates the USM APEX strategy (Sen 1977, 1999, 2000). Combining capacity building and a commitment to social justice and sustainability necessitates a serious engagement with how USM can realize the twin goals of producing graduates fit for the global knowledge economy and at the same time imbued with moral sensibility. Indeed the ethics of a sustainable society committed to social values, intersubjective respect, and recognition as well as cultural understanding run up hard against a philosophy of individualism, profit, personal power, and self-expression at the expense of social responsibilities, loyalties, and shared values.

The key issue is the temperance of ambition by responsibility, profit by restraint, and the rights of individual advancement by social duty. The strength of USM’s commitment to sustainability and deep values also provides opportunities for engaging in new untapped markets for educational development.
In other words, the values USM is seeking to inculcate are a fundamental strength and opportunity. Yet, unless USM can adequately engage with, understand how creativity and innovation in students may translate into net loss by brain drain, and avoid the reduction of creativity to pursuit of individual profit and advancement for its own sake, the promise of APEX may not be realized.

The APEX programme of USM is in part an attempt to grapple with a fundamental issue which characterizes contemporary globalization. How does USM in its commitment to excellence and engaging creativity and innovation not end up producing graduates who use the public good of a public education system to effect private gains at the expense of the national interest and at the expense of their fellow citizens and the ethical commitments of USM? This is a core binary issue that characterizes and problematizes the USM APEX agenda.

The role that an APEX University can play in ensuring that students are inculcated with positive social values, while cosmopolitan and global in their outlook relies on social awareness and ethical commitment. Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar makes a prescient remark in regards to APEX and the social outcomes that are the result of university education. The problem of ‘brain drain’ and losing the ‘best and brightest’ is a critical issue for Malaysian higher education. According to Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar, “This whole apex programme has been my ‘baby’ as I am very concerned that many of our top students go overseas and often do not return to serve at home” (Chapman and Kaur 2008). Consider also for example the following sentiment:
In the area of teaching and learning, for example, the university will provide and offer various programmes relating to a deeper understanding of “sustainability” so that the learning accrued by students and staff will compel them to be more involved, committed and dedicated for the sustainable wellness of the institution, community, and global environment. Though many attempts have been successfully carried out in the past, some are still on-going to engage and instil values which will further help to nurture ethically responsible, and morally-sound adolescents of the school-going age. Their involvement in tertiary education and campus life will not only prepare them as employees with good corporate responsibility but also to be responsible global citizens with strong national-local commitments (USM 2008, iv).

The objectives of USM’s APEX strategy with respect to inculcating moral values and commitments into its students (sustainable ethics being pre-eminent) are critical to its pedagogical agenda. At the same time, USM’s APEX agenda seeks to inculcate and encourage creativity and innovation “in research and teaching” (Ramli and Dzulkifli 2008, 12). The commitment to creativity and innovation is however rooted in commitments to applying this creativity proactively to the social good. In large measure, this commitment is an articulation of a Malaysian commitment both to the necessary pedagogical reform necessary for a knowledge economy as well as a commitment to an ethical basis for education. Former Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi captures the general philosophy:

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 (Abdullah 2007, 3).

A critical issue and concern that currently animates the USM APEX strategy is recognition that pursuing creativity and tying ethical commitment to the aims of education in the service of both national interests and the interests of humanity cannot be achieved by moral suasion alone. In other words, the reason that creativity and ethical commitment exist in a binary in the current context of globalization is due to specific ways in which asymmetric inequalities and a culture of consumerist individualism cohere to effect and transform public goods into private possessions. This transformation occurs at the global level in process such as ‘brain drains’ from developing nations to first world nations, buy in by students and academic staff into an individualistic and self-centred view of creativity which lends itself to the idea that creativity is the property of individuals irrespective of their social connectedness.

The upshot from this is the hegemony of the idea that rewards for creativity go to individuals, and that these rewards are private rather than public. In other words, a combination of social, cultural and economic global inequality, and the hegemony of possessive individualism mean that public investments in inculcating and encouraging creativity in students and staff may be rewarded by withdrawal from the societies that have funded and nurtured these
attributes. We have to avoid a sense of individual economic and pecuniary entitlement to individuals at the expense of the public good.

The sociological phenomenon that the USM APEX strategy is seeking to engage is captured in the way a creative class of innovators and creative agents cohere as a ‘creative class’ within contemporary globalization. Richard Florida provides us with an excellent introduction into how the creative class is manifesting within globalization. According to Florida: “In the past few decades, human creativity has replaced natural resources and physical capital as the predominant driver of economic growth” (Florida 2006, 1). The creative class according to Florida coheres around particular regions cities and institutions. Florida writes:

The distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to “create meaningful new forms.” The super-creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the “thought leadership” of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion-makers. Members of this super-creative core produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful – such as designing a product that can be widely made, sold and used; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again (Florida 2003, 8).

According to Florida, the development of a new creative class is the sociological manifestation of new
forms of knowledge production and globalization. In his discussion of the American example, Florida points out that one of the major reasons for American advantage in innovation lies in its capacity to attract creative and innovative people from all over the world (Florida 2004b). According to Florida, economic growth and development relies not on competition for goods or products but rather for people. This insight, which is also captured by Sahol Hamid Abu Bakar in his assertion that APEX is about retaining the best and brightest for Malaysian development. However, the issue is more than simply talent retention. It is also talent attraction. Understanding that an APEX University must also be a talent attracting university is a critical issue. USM plans to, attract ‘new talent’ through ‘significant investment’ (Dzulkifli 2009, 6). The basic aim is to:

Raise and create the thrust toward (a) the diversity of talents to foster innovation in research and teaching, (b) the recruitment of quality staff (some in the category of “towering personality”) and graduate students to promote quality research, fundamental research in particular, (c) the improvement of publication infrastructure, international collaborations, (d) creating incentives and opportunities such as fellowships, outreach programmes, new research horizons, research-focused curriculum (as opposed to teaching-focused), flexible remuneration structure and so forth (Ramli and Dzulkifli 2008, 12).

Nevertheless, despite the aim of attracting and retaining talent, how is this to be achieved in asymmetric globalization and the uneven and relentless pull of foreign institutions for creative talent? In other words, how does USM avoid simply
producing creative talent that is then farmed off by other countries who have the capacity to cherry-pick and recruit? This issue poses a significant threat to the APEX strategy and needs understanding. The answer to this conundrum lies in the way USM articulates its values and integrates itself into alternative global networks and capacity creating engagements.

How for example can Malaysian universities whose pay scales and funding base are significantly lower than many American and European universities hope to maintain and keep staff in an environment where globally recognized elite universities can simply cherry-pick talent? We in fact compete and succeed in the traditional framework of higher educational excellence. However, competing and excellence are not ethically and culturally blind. Excellence in what? Competition to achieve what?

Richard Florida argues that the capacity to attract people is the key; his analysis of the way creative people are rewarded and engaged points to how successful a nation, city, region, or university will be in attracting and retaining creative talent. The significance of the ‘cultural economy’ that is inclusive tolerant and diverse to attract creative talent is a central and underpinning issue with APEX reform. This salient issue which does not receive as much attention as it deserves nonetheless points to a very real and important advantage that USM has in achieving its APEX goals.

USM’s efforts at internationalizing its staff and engaging with innovation and creativity are aided by its commitment to sustainable values found in The University in a Garden concept. Pursuit of environmentally friendly transport such as bicycling
and support for greening in USM all contribute to the creation of an environment that is conducive for teaching and learning, and makes attractive for international and local staff and students. The commitment to the values of diversity in staffing and sustainability in the environment are critical elements of a unified values orientation, which is an exemplar of USM’s overall philosophy.

The multicultural and inclusive nature of Penang is also of critical importance since it represents the sorts of tolerant values and comfort with diversity that attracts people with creative skills and dispositions. The kind of communities recognized by Richard Florida and many other scholars as welcoming to creative talent is represented by Penang’s multicultural and safe environment. USM’s location within such an inclusive and tolerant community is strength in its positioning that is increasingly recognized as providing significant competitive advantage. The importance of, ‘increasingly diverse, tolerant, and inclusive’ social environments as the necessary social and environmental milieu of creativity is something the APEX strategy is directly addressing (Florida 2004a, 3).

Given the above discussion, how then do USM and its APEX strategy engage with the problems of creativity and providing incentives to creative students and staff to stay and work at USM and to contribute to social problems in a context of global inequality and unequal resources? In other words, in simple terms how does USM avoid producing creative and innovative graduates who espouse elitist and individualistic values at the expense of the common good (Higley et al. 1991).
The classical exposition of this phenomenon can be found in Christopher Lasch’s, profound work, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (Lasch 1995). How can USM practically avoid the pitfalls captured in Lasch’s famous work, when elites, the products of our university educational systems’ betray and disassociate themselves from socially responsible values? The answer to this is complex but elements of a formulation exist within USM’s APEX strategy.

Significant research into what attracts and retains creative people in institutions suggests that while pecuniary rewards are important, non-pecuniary benefits are equally if not more important. Living in an environment that is tolerant, environmentally sustainable and diverse, and being surrounded by others who are creative, from artists through to intellectuals is of critical importance to sustaining the necessary social milieu that is incisive for creativity. In other words, large sums of money will not of itself enable institutions or communities to maintain and sustain a creative culture (Florida 2004a; Florida and Gates 2001).

USM’s strategy of environmental sustainability, its commitment to tolerant and inclusive values are very important aspects in its drive to maintain and attract creative people. The USM strategy of engagement with its local community inculcates a social environment that attracts and maintains creative talent. Richard Florida and Gary Gates argued: “a connection exists between a metropolitan area’s level of tolerance for a range of people, its ethnic and social diversity, and its success in attracting talented people” (Florida and Gates 2001, 1).
The critical point in relationship to USM’s APEX strategy is that it is also a cultural strategy. USM’s APEX sustainability focus recognizes that universities are cultural institutions that instil, articulate, and engage values rather than simply profit. As a cultural institution, USM through its policy framework recognizes that producing increases in human capital through educational attainment is not enough to produce the desired social, economic, and cultural outcomes aimed for in the APEX programme. The primary argument of the cultural economy theorists is met by the USM sustainability strategy, yet rather than accepting neo-liberal definitions of individual creativity and ownership, USM is attempting to engage creativity within a non-individualistic and socially responsible cultural value set.

How then does USM engage its mission and seek competitive advantage in conditions of globalization that are unequal, dynamic, and often stacked against it? How does it ensure that its creative talent is not dissipated or cherry-picked? Part of the answer curiously lies in the attitudes and dispositions of academics and administrators within USM. Two essential preconditions are critical. First, USM must understand that ‘imaginative global strategies’ are often fuelled by:

The spirit of sympathetic global engagement, a spirit grounded in a strong sense of one’s own national identity and institutional project but also characterised by a vigorous curiosity about other cultures and nations and instinctive empathy for their higher education institutions and personnel (Marginson and van der Wende 2007, 18).
Second, USM’s APEX strategy involves re-evaluating creativity not simply as individual inspiration but rather understanding it as a process developed as we work with trying to engage and solve problems. Creativity in such an understanding is formed through cultural practices and engaging culturally informed problems. It is not an ‘event’ occurring as it were outside of situated cultural problematic and issues. The commitment of USM to sustainability thus grounds the rhetoric of creativity in socially and culturally sustainable norms and values, which are fluid but not entirely open-ended.

In short, the normative aims of USM as a sustainability-led institution provide a temperance of ‘radically individualistic’ notions of creativity. Given that USM’s APEX strategy aims to embed creativity in a commitment to public values and the common good through education for sustainable development, how then does that integrate and relate to the second great binary that structures the ongoing problematic of the USM APEX initiative? The problem of engaging competitive advantage while pursuing sustainable values is critically a problem of keeping and attracting creative talent. The threat of ‘brain drain’ is very real but the opportunity for USM to reengage the Blue Ocean of opportunity is also very real. Balancing the desire for social responsibility in graduates and encouraging creativity and innovation is a critical issue for USM’s APEX success.
DARE WE TAKE THE RISK?
One of the most salient issues facing universities in the process of reform is the relations of social capital that inform day to day interaction within universities and between universities and the broader society (Bouma, van Soest, and Bulte 2006; Goddard 2003; Gonzalez-Brambila, Veloso, and Krackhardt 2008; Lemmel 2001; Pye 2001; Veenstra 2003). Serious change in institutional direction involves the taking of significant risk and taking risk relies on trust between people (Fukuyama 1995; Inglehart 1999; de Ruijter and van Londen 2006; Misztal 2001; Ofle 1999; Uslaner and Conley 2003; Warren 1999). The extent then to which universities operate on trust, engender trust, and can develop trust correlates to the capacity to take risks and change.

The USM project is founded on the assumption that academics, administrators, and students can take risks. Risk and its foundation on trust is a critical ingredient to USM’s success (Beck 2006; Bullena, Fahey, and Kenway 2006; Hovden 2004; Luhmann 1996; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Yet do we know how trust is generated? (Bohnet and Zeckhauser 2003; Bryk and Schneider 2002; Sjöberg 2008; Tschannen-Moran 2001). One of the critical problems facing USM’s APEX strategy is the way in which commitment to the public good (sustainability) and collective forms of choice that inform it are in tension with individualistic choices made in a purely instrumental and market-driven fashion. USM’s approach to sustainability draws strength from the communitarian values that inform Malaysian culture and these values form a strong basis for generating trust within USM and between USM and the broader civil society. As Kymilcka points out, a “sense of shared identity [that] helps sustain the relationships
of trust and solidarity” is critical for promoting effective change (Kymlicka 2001, 311).

Do we have any idea how we can expect academics and administrators to take risk? Can USM’s APEX strategy work without staff and students prepared to take risk and to trust? Can sustainability as values approach to higher education be maintained without trust and risk taking? Compounding this is the necessity for universities to be trusted by society. This issue is often ignored or simply assumed. However, social trust and the respect that universities are accorded in a society is deeply influenced by the perception that citizens, business, and government have of a university.

A university going through a process of transformation and rearticulation of its vision and mission needs social trust as a necessary precondition for success. Thus, there are two fundamental areas where the issue of trust connects to the university: first, trust within the institution – the quality of social capital within a university, and second trust between the university and the broader society.

Implicit within the strategic reorientation of USM and its commitment to sustainability values are a reengagement with society and a reengagement with the way universities maintain legitimacy and social value to a community. Given the historic changes underway both globally and locally, which are in part outlined above, the way universities maintain legitimacy and trust also needs to be re-theorized. Globalization, ICT, civil society, the global pressures on the authority of the state, and the growing sense that consumerist and market values are permeating
every opening allowed to them means that the ‘moral mission’ of a university and the legitimacy it derives from this ‘moral mission’ needs to be understood and engaged with. Trust is established when institutional participants understand and share the ‘moral values’ of the institution.

Part of this engendering trust strategy is based upon the rearticulation of the university mission. The commitment to sustainability clearly positions the university in helping to solve and engage with the most pressing and difficult problem faced by local and global community in the contemporary era. This repositioning of the university (which we have articulated above in the language of competitive advantage) is also a way of maintaining system legitimacy, social respect, and trust in an increasingly fractured and decentered environment where trust of government and public institutions is on the wane.

In other words, not only does the strategy of sustainability and engagement with civil society articulate a new and novel approach to engaging competitive advantage, but it also enables the university to regain and build trust between it and the broader community in an environment where trust as a social precondition to effectiveness and legitimacy is increasingly under threat. This fundamental observation is rooted in a fundamental understanding of social capital and the way that legitimacy and trust are constantly reworked and engaged with in a dynamic manner in contemporary society. Assuming that our institutions of higher education can always rely on their historically given status to ensure trust and legitimacy is to fail to grasp how change in Malaysian society and globally
is radically reorienting the way people view the role, function, and social legitimacy of higher education.

USM’s rearticulation of its mission to sustainability reworks the university mission towards one of the most central ethical projects of our time: ‘protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty’ which is according to the Earth Charter ‘a sacred trust’ (UNESCO 2000, 2). The USM project connects strongly and centrally to the aspirations and needs of real communities and the moral expectations of the global and local community. The commitment both to diversity and sustainability is a central characteristic of the USM approach. Indeed from the perspective of USM’s philosophy, celebrating and encouraging diversity is central to the rationale of sustainability.

Such a strong connection of a university mission to the moral yearnings and practical problems of Malaysian citizens is a critical and important contributor to building and maintaining trust between the people and higher education in Malaysia (Sharifah Hapsah 2007). Concurrently, it also reinforces the leadership role that publicly funded universities play as centres of moral and ethical engagement with their society and the broader world. Another aspect of the above analysis that needs rearticulation in respect to community attitudes, trust, and the way people perceive USM as a public institution in an educational terrain increasingly influenced by privatization.
CONCLUSION
Sustainability as the Primary Context
The sustainability APEX strategy of USM prides Malaysia with a hard-headed template for university reform in contemporary globalization. Refining and articulating the mission of USM is not a simple task. The theories and intellectual capital that inform USM’s project are in need of elaboration. Addressing issues of sustainability, development, and increasing opportunity requires a reformulated understanding of globalization and higher education.

The sustainability strategy of USM represents a clear and intellectually challenging re-theorization of what role higher education must play in Malaysian national development. It also represents a significantly different approach to the problems of globalization. It also provides a platform for repositioning USM in the higher education market place as a leader in addressing the critical and salient issues that currently perplex the world. The broad principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a philosophical-pedagogical way forward provides some of the answers for the contradictions outlined and discussed throughout this paper.

Complex issues face USM, and engaging these issues theoretically and practically is of central concern. In this brief discussion, we have touched on several critical problems that characterize the discursive horizon of USM’s reform agenda. We have discussed the tension between sustainability and competitive advantage, the tensions between creativity and social good, the tensions involved in educational borrowing and the desire to move outside the square as well as the problems of social solidarity and communitarian values being pressured by neo-liberal individualism. Articulating these problems in no means necessarily
entails agreement on all the possible ways to interpret USM’s project.

If as analyzed above we find that Malaysian universities compete in an environment that is both ethically unsustainable and structurally prejudiced against success then reformulating the normative mission of the university towards sustainability provides a critical way forward for USM. USM’s strategy is deeply rooted in the commitment to, “social justice, and spiritual, moral, and ethical strength” (Alderman 2001, 49) which is the basis of Malaysian educational values (Government of Malaysia 1996). The commitment to diversity, environmental protection, social justice, and cultural dignity are the hallmarks of USM’s commitment to excellence. Developing what this means and how it can be articulated in the difficult and challenging context of contemporary globalization is a critical challenge. It is a challenge that must be met. The aims of USM are captured neatly in the following:

USM will set its vision of a sustainable tomorrow while keenly promoting values such as equity, accessibility, availability, affordability and quality as the optimal endpoints. Concomitantly, USM will embrace the protection of the ecosystem, the conservation and restoration of resources as well as the development of human and intellectual capitals for this purpose. USM will position itself to facilitate in meeting existing (e.g., Millennium Development Goals) and other future global aspirations towards the upliftment of the billions trapped at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid (USM 2008, iii).
The extent, to which USM can meet the aims outlined above, relies in large measure on the commitments and understandings of its students and staff. The goals USM sets itself are ambitious, they are a challenge and they require commitment. They are goals worthy of an institution that truly aspires to be a university for a sustainable millennium.
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REFERENCES


REFERENCES


REFERENCES


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REFERENCES


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References


REFERENCES


INDEX

APEX status
  commitment, 29, 36, 40–42, 43, 50, 52
  for national development, 5, 9, 57
  goals, 6, 16, 19, 33, 37, 40
  governance, 7, 34
  involvement (see civil society)
  metaphor (see Blue Ocean)
  pressure, 16, 21, 34–35, 53
  problem, 2–3, 9–10, 17, 36, 41, 50, 52
  repositioning, 24, 54, 57 (see also positional advantage)
  risk, 6, 23, 31, 52–53
  threat, 9, 16, 23, 31–32, 35, 46, 50
  value, 20, 21, 41–42, 49–50, 52

Blue Ocean, 24–26, 50
  brain drain, 14, 41, 43, 50

  competitive advantage
    for sustainability, 17, 20–21, 23–24, 26, 50, 54
    in higher education, 16, 19, 20
    cost advantage, 18–19
    differential advantage, 18
    source, 19–20, 47
    within globalization, 31, 49

  creativity, 23, 39–43, 46–50
    outcome, 39, 41, 43
  See also innovation

  culture, 12, 43, 48, 49
    cultural leadership, 32–33
    cultural dignity/respect, 29–30, 33, 37, 58
    cultural forces, 33
    cultural resource, 35
    value, 29, 35–36, 49–50, 52
  See also

  differentiation, 24, 26

  economic, 8, 12, 17, 19, 22, 24, 37, 43
  growth, 6–7, 12, 29, 44–45
  of neo-liberalism (see neo-liberalism: in economic)
  power, 9, 15, 30–31, 33 (see also globalization: power and prejudice)
  education, 10, 29–30, 34, 36, 40, 42–43.

  capacity building, 37, 40. See also human capital
  civil society, 10, 22, 26–27, 52–54
  communitarianism,
    communitarian culture, 35, 36
    communitarian value, 35, 38, 40, 52, 57
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>development, 6</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source of comparative advantage, 17</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge economy, 6, 13, 30, 39–40, 42–43</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pressures, 22, 39, 40</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also economic; neo-liberalism</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge society, 30, 37, 39</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national development, 5, 9, 13, 57</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for stability cultural, 20</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in higher education, 5, 13, 57</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political, 20, 21</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social, 13, 20, 21, 29</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neo-liberalism, 20</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hegemony, 33, 38</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in culture, 35, 49</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in economic, 15, 38</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choice, 16</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethical value, 16</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in higher education, 15, 18, 35</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change, 18</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pressure, 16</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of globalization, 16, 32, 33</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pedagogy, for higher education, 10, 29</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem, 10, 13, 19, 22, 29, 41</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching and learning, 42</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positional advantage, 21. See also Blue Ocean</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>risk, 6, 8, 23, 31</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capacity of, 52</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foundation on trust, 52</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in respect of change, 52</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social capital, 52, 53, 54. See also human capital</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socio-economic, 5, 31</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inequality, 12, 19</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social capital (see social capital)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sustainability, 2, 25, 27, 40, 42, 53–54, 57–58</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competitive advantage for (see competitive advantage: for sustainability)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development, 5, 7, 37, 50</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environmental, 12, 29, 47, 48, 55</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of culture, 36, 49, 52</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on creativity, 23, 50</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship, 22</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trust, 54–55</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connection, 55 (see also social capital)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correlation, 52, 53 (see also risk)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Index

develop, 52
engendering, 54
social, 53

culture, 29, 34–36, 49–50, 52
social, 40–41, 53
See also culture
vertical disadvantage, 13
difference, 13