

HAVE WE LOST OUR DIRECTION?: THE INTERSECTIONALITY BETWEEN THE GENDER GAP, ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Is there a 'gender gap' in academic 'achievement' if we analyse this 'apparent' phenomenon based on the larger philosophical framework on the role of higher education²? Does one achieve excellence just because of good grades or by repeatedly getting a first class honours in the university? This paper attempts to discuss the conceptual framework of the intersectionality between the gender gap, academic achievement and the role of higher education so as to elicit a broader and nuanced understanding of this 'phenomenon' from feminist theories of education. This discussion will be juxtaposed against historical philosophy of undergraduate education within the context of the University of Malaya. The paper argues that there is little 'reward' in today's universities for equipping students with the knowledge and the habits of mind that will make them wise, critical thinkers, balanced human beings possessing living skills. Rarely do the structures framing undergraduate education speak of critical questioning, responsible citizenship, ethics of care and nurturing, self-actualisation, transformative process or simply an obligation to leave the world as a better place. Most higher educational institutions including University of Malaya seems to construct the role of higher education in the university by over-linking it with entrepreneurship, employability and marketability.

Keywords: philosophy of higher education, feminist perspectives, education, gender gap and academic achievement

Introduction

The article will discuss the conceptual framework of intersectionality of gender gap, academic achievement and the role of higher education at the undergraduate level within the context of University of Malaya. The role of higher education in the university and its principles of education will be examined from feminist perspectives. The article will be divided into six parts which includes: firstly, the role of higher education; secondly, the higher educational development and the discourse of gender gap in academic achievement in Malaysia; thirdly, higher education crisis in Malaysia; fourthly, what University of Malaya has forgotten; fifthly; intersectionality between the gender gap, academic achievement and the role of higher education; and finally the conclusion.

The Role of Higher Education

The roles of higher education in this article make an introduction by referring to brief historical traditions of the American and European higher education principles. In

Malaysia, specifically, the public universities are monitored and assessed according to the rankings of TIMES Higher Education Top World University Rankings and QS World University Rankings³. This measurement serves as indicator of success and outputs in which Malaysian Government pushes public universities to chart out their directions in the next five years “to be in the world top 100 universities to be a preferred choice to attract students” (The Star, 11th November 2012)⁴. Many top ten universities in the TIMES Higher Education Rankings and QS World University Rankings are American and European universities⁵. Therefore, it is crucial in this article to present a brief snapshot of their historical traditions of higher education principles which will serve as a context when discussion on higher education policies and principles in Malaysia, especially within the context of University of Malaya.

In 1973, the American Carnegie Commission on Higher Education⁶ identified five purposes that historically have been served by American higher education framework which were incorporated in the state universities missions; firstly opportunities for individual student development; the advancement of human capability in society at large; enlargement of educational justice; the transmission and advancement of learning and wisdom; and finally, the critical evaluation of society for the sake of society’s self-renewal (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education 1973, pg.69).

Following an eighteenth century German educational theorist, in 1810, Humboldt envisaged the role of universities being based on three principles, “unity of research and teaching, freedom of teaching and academic self-governance” ((Boulton, G. et al 2008, pg.3). He further elaborated on the idea of higher education being a catalyst for freedom and engagement with society, in which he states that: “the ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own person [...] through the impact of actions in our own lives. This task ‘can only be implemented through the links established between ourselves as individuals and the world around us” (UNESCO 1993, pg 9). Humboldt does not separate teaching and research components or even see it as a competition between two or one above the other; instead he sees it as an intermingling and interconnectedness of two major principles of higher education and what university is all about (UNESCO 1993)⁷. Humboldt (UNESCO 1993) continued to stress the search for new knowledge through research.

Fourty years later, in 1852, Newman (1996), wrote about the idea of a university, in which he elaborated on the role of universities encouraging, “collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge”. In *The Idea of University*, Newman (1996) eloquently stated the following:

A University is a place ... whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge; ... a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse. ... It is the place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, ... discoveries verified and perfected, and ... error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. ... Mutual education, in a large sense of the word, is one of the great and incessant occupations of human society. ... One generation forms another. ... We must consult the living man and listen to his living voice, ... by familiar intercourse ... to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes” (Newman 1996, pg .25)

The 'collision of mind with mind and knowledge with knowledge' gives a picture of fervent debates and even possible arguments among intellectuals. We can see then the appreciation of how traditionally, the university is a place for free expression, embracing differences, a place for experiment, trial and error. It is in the 'collision of minds' which permeates endless possibilities of new knowledge, discoveries and engagement. Ergo, the role of the university does not only delineate the functions of university, but also depict how those functions can be achieved. In Humboldt's, 'it is the atmosphere of openness, humility of listening to other subjects of investigation, the 'living voice' gives rise to how learning takes place from research processes (Boulton, G. et al 2008, pg.3).

Humboldt correctly forewarned that higher education institutions may also become protective of its institutional outlook. As we may know, there are many institutional and national purposes for higher education institutions which clashes with and even inhibit the purposes of higher education and academic freedom. As expressed by Humboldt (UNESCO 1993): "State influence on education would 'always favour one particular form'; this was particularly deleterious if it 'relates to man as a moral being [...] and ceases altogether to have any beneficial action if the individual is sacrificed to the citizen'" (UNESCO 1993, pg 4).

Looking into contemporary principles of higher education in Europe, The Magna Charta Observatory of Fundamental Universities of Values and Rights 1988⁸ was established and is concerned with the protection and promulgation of higher education and its responsibilities to the state and to society. The Magna Charta Observatory has been tasked to monitor universities and higher educational institutions which are signatories to the Magna Charta Universitatum which sets forth the fundamental principles of higher education institutions and set the limits to compromises an institution can make when dealing with the state, the market, students, academics and the needs of the institution as an administrative entity (Glass 2012, pg.4). The Magna Charta Universitatum⁹ has become the main reference point for discussions on the fundamental principles of higher education institutions (Glass 2012, pg.5). The Universitatum is a document that was developed by Rectors of European universities in 1988 in the context of preparations for the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna, Europe's oldest university¹⁰. As Glass (2012, pg.2) mentioned that although there are older universities in the world, Europe considers Bologna the first modern conception of the university as it exists today, which was later refined and institutionalised by Humboldt¹¹. According to Glass (2012) during the conference:¹²

Europe was still politically and ideologically divided between East and West. Universities in both realms were fully public institutions, controlled, funded and steered by the state. The European rectors involved in the development of the Universitatum felt the need "to re-launch the traditional concept of higher education [based on the example of Bologna], underlining the decisive role it has played in European history and in the development of Europe" and to diminish "a degree of risk involved for universities, in the sense that higher education policy might be determined by others, beyond universities. (Glass 2012, pg.4)

Glass (2012), further highlighted that in 2008 which was the twentieth anniversary of the Magna Charta Universitatum, the founders of the document recalled that "the initiative was intended to promote the role of the universities in the service of society

as a whole” and, on the other hand, to respond to “a need to proclaim the principles of certain universal truths” (Glass 2012, pg.4). She highlighted the core of the above “truths” which can be presented as the four “fundamental principles” (Glass 2012, pg.4). These are:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies. Teaching and research in universities must be inseparable. Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life. A university’s constant care is to attain universal knowledge, which requires transcending geographical and political boundaries and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other (Glass 2012, pg.5).

Higher Educational Development Plans and the Discourse of Gender Gap in Academic Achievement in Malaysia

On the higher educational development plans, in 1988, the Ministry of Education and the government drafted a framework on The National Education Philosophy (NEP) for Malaysia (Habsah et.al 2009). The NEP was revised in 1996. The NEP enshrines the Ministry’s and Government’s vision of education as a ‘means for the holistic development of all children: intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically’ (Habsah et.al 2009, pg.160). From the research published by Habsah et.al (2009), the NEP stated a holistic vision of education in which as follows:

education in Malaysia is an ongoing effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal wellbeing as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society, and the nation at large. (Habsah et.al. 2009, pg.162)

However, when the state moves towards Vision 2020 and in the pursuit of ‘modernisation’, the role of education evolves towards commercialization, labour force, ‘market driven’ and internationalisation. This can be seen from the strategic plan that was crafted in 2007 which was announced in the Ninth Malaysian Plan 2006 (Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE 2007). The thrust of Malaysian National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) was to ensure that institutions of higher learning transform and play the important role of supplying ‘human capital’, in which this was stated: “Malaysia needs to produce human capital with a first class mind set in order to face developmental challenges in knowledge and innovation based economy. The desired human capital should be knowledgeable, skilful and possess a superior personality. In relation to these needs, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) was formulated with the vision to transform higher education within the context of establishing Malaysia as an international hub of excellence for higher education. This transformation is the foundation towards attaining merit and sustainability for the higher education system beyond 2020” (MOHE 2007).

Under the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015 second thrust¹³ assessment on the success and progress of Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010 specifically on education and creating 'quality human capital' of first class mentality individuals; quantitative measures based on infrastructural and external quantities were chosen as analysis of progress of the national mission (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2011, pg. 47). Higher education development was assessed with its correlation with the numbers of higher educational institutions and their enrollments without a focus on the role of higher education (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2011). This can be illustrated from the following analysis in the above report:

- i. New Universities, University Colleges, Branch Campuses, Polytechnics and Community Colleges have grown phenomenally. In 2005 there were 71 such public institutions and an incredible 559 in the private sector. Given that the population of Malaysia was 26.75 million that year, it meant that there was 1 higher education institution for every 42,460 people.
- ii. Enrolment in higher education rose from 649,000 in 2005 to 949,000 in 2009 (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2011, pg. 46-47).

In addition, the progress report also highlighted the number of unemployment amongst graduates is on the increased and there is a mechanism created to engage in retraining and skill upgrading of these graduates (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2011, pg. 47)¹⁴. According to statistics by Higher Education Ministry Malaysia, in 2010, 30,000 graduates remained jobless six months after graduation in which the number of female graduates unemployed accounts for 21,760; and is higher than male graduates which is 10,240 (Bernama 29th June 2010). "Graduates emerging from the national education system are failing to meet the expectations of prospective employers due to a lack of critical thinking skills and poor communication" (The Star 5th March 2012). These reports makes it critical to ask and evaluate in terms of what graduates have learnt or acquired during their undergraduate education in our higher education institutions and also the question of optimum maximization of resources during the undergraduate education?

For the next phase of development plans which is within the timeline of 2011-2015, the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011 sees the role of higher education lies greatly with employability and industry driven (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2011). The report stated the following:

to improve the competence of graduates, their employability will be one of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) of universities. Financial allocation to universities will depend on the achievement of their KPI targets. [...] The quality and relevancy of curriculum and courses is an important factor to the employability of graduates. During the Plan period, higher education institutions will undertake an exercise to review their curricula and courses and seek to align programme and learning outcomes with requirements of industry and employers (Tenth Malaysian Plan 2011, pg.227).

It is ironic that the progress in Malaysian development plans on higher education focuses on employability and market driven and not looking at the broader philosophical foundations of higher education, and yet on the other hand, the Deputy Prime Minister and also the Education Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yasin was reported mentioning "many famous universities have lost their life and soul, and fail to produce moral and courteous individuals" (Chapman, June 2010). It is such a contradiction and lack of

integration in terms of the Government's plans for higher education and its philosophy and what has been said by the Education Minister.

The intersecting issue with the above is the question of 'apparent' gender gap in academic achievement in universities in Malaysia. It is contested and argued in this article that this phenomenon needs to be examined critically against the larger framework of the philosophy of higher education from the feminist standpoint. Perhaps then the 'apparent' gender gap phenomenon in universities will not be seen as 'apparent' enough, or a generalized phenomenon and alarming situation that cuts across all universities, faculties, disciplines and levels of studies. Putting the phenomenon in context within the Malaysian education reports and discourses, the National Education Report in 2004 expressed concerns that gender gap in achievement cuts across secondary levels and tertiary education (Ministry of Education 2004, pg.22). It is stated that "even though in Malaysia, male and female students have equal access to education and the education policy does not discriminate based on gender, however, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has raised its concern over low academic achievement of male students at the upper secondary level and university level" (Ministry of Education 2004, pg.22).

In the Malaysian Education Blueprint Executive Report 2012, the issue of gender gap in academic achievement been highlighted as one of the key problematic areas of lack of equity (Preliminary Report-Executive Summary-Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2012). The report pointed out the following:

The gender gap is both significant and increasing, having widened over the last five years. Girls consistently outperform boys at every level; the gap in performance is already evident at UPSR level and increases over a student's lifetime up to university level, where females comprise approximately 70% of the cohort. While this phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia, it does require attention to ensure that the country does not have a cohort of "lost boys" who either leave school early or with low attainment levels (Preliminary Report-Executive Summary-Malaysian Education Blueprint:2013-2025, pg.E9).

In the Parliamentary debates, the issues of boys 'underachieving' have been mentioned and discourses on 'failing boys' seems to dominate the debate (Hansard, 2008). There are also responses by majority of Parliamentarians for interventions such as quotas according to gender favouring boys for the enrollment of undergraduates at public universities as a reaction to this issue (Hansard, 2008) such as the following example:

[...] adakah dengan sistem meritokrasi yang sama bagi pengambilan lelaki dan perempuan yang menjadikan jumlah ramainya pelajar perempuan berbanding lelaki dan perlukah meritokrasi pelajar lelaki dikurangkan untuk mengatasi masalah ini (Hansard 22 July 2008)

In a newspaper interview with a former Dean of a public university, he expressed that, with our current education system, women are destined for academic excellence from the first day they start school. Women are just so much better at rote learning and memorisation. Boys can't be bothered. Our system does not encourage critical or analytical thinking, which boys are better at. As a result, your exam scores will reflect how much you can retain in your memory. It is time we changed our education system

from what I call “memory downloading” and exam-oriented to a more continuous assessment.

Exams are seasonal but continuous assessment will make people think better and this will result in better students. I must say that although the men get lower grades than the women in university, when I meet these students, the men are more brilliant socially. The guys with the lower scores tend to be more dynamic than the women with higher scores. Some of the top female students are so timid that they look at the floor when I speak to them. Women also think better under pressure. Thus, as they are usually better prepared for exams, they just perform better. Men panic more when it comes to exams (Sabanayagam 2006).

A cursory survey of public universities and private colleges reveals a startling pattern. The gender ratio is not only levelling out but women are overtaking men, especially in the social sciences and increasingly even in professional courses (Neil Khor, 2010). However, even when employability is used as one of the indicators to measure academic achievement in higher education, female students seem to be lagging behind male students in terms of getting an opportunity in the job market (Bernama 29th June 2010).

Clearly the national and public discourses above paint a simplistic argument and analysis which depicts a generalization and narrow analysis based on problematic measures of purely examination results and the CGPA. However, such discourses fail to bring in the broader philosophical arguments of higher education.

Higher Education in Crisis in Malaysia

Shad Saleem Faruqi (The Star, 2012) commenting on higher education called for injecting ‘humanity and holistic education’ to the ivory tower, “it is time we look at how our universities can be true to their noble calling as a mirror of humanity’s great heritage rather than be in danger of choosing show over substance”¹⁵. Shad Saleem Faruqi (The Star, 2012) further reiterated the calls of many critiques of our higher education in which it is said to lack direction and a balanced approach¹⁶. We are either too industry or ‘market’ driven and quite taken by professional courses by compromising the core principles of higher education¹⁷. Shad Saleem Faruqi calls for local universities in the country to have better aspirations:

“The role of universities is to advance knowledge and build characters and not just careers. In their obsession with narrow professional goals and employability of graduates, many universities adopt curricula that are bereft of the arts and humanities. This paucity and poverty is accentuated because, unlike many countries, professional courses in Malaysia do not require a degree at entry point. If a university is true to its worth, it must provide holistic education and produce well-balanced graduates who have professionalism as well as idealism, an understanding of the realities as well as a vision of what ought to be. Merely supplying technically-sound but morally-neutral human cogs in an industrial wheel to contribute to high production figures, will not in the long run lead to enlightened development of human capital or of society” (2012)¹⁸.

In the online journal of ‘Project Malaysia: An Experiment with Nation Building’¹⁹ which is a public project of diverse voices and backgrounds flagged critical analysis the state of affairs of higher education in Malaysia and the role of higher education

given the context of globalization and commercialization. Amongst the main critical points that were addressed is a need for a balance and 'mixed approach' in deciding the philosophy of higher education when the continuous tensions of epistemological philosophy vs. political philosophy and liberal education vs. vocational trainings are at play in the continuous assessment of our teaching, research and the value in which the higher educational institution chooses to adhere in its direction (Azmi Sharom 2010).

What University Malaya Has Forgotten

University of Malaya has a long history hallmark of university undergraduate education in Malaysia. In 1948, a Commission was established to give recommendations and set the philosophy of undergraduate education indicating the type of education that was envisioned when the idea of a university for Malaya was first mooted (Carr-Saunders Report, 1948). According to the report, the Commission crafted the philosophy of the university as the following, firstly, 'it is vital that the university be the centre of uncurbed and unfettered intellectual activity as it should be the focus of intellectual self-expression' (pg.9); secondly, "a great emphasis is laid on the need for University Malaya to be autonomous as the principle of autonomy is widely accepted as compatible with progress" (pg.10); thirdly, "its officers and teachers must not be government servants but must be in a position to speak the truth as they see it whether it is convenient or inconvenient for the time being" (pg.21); fourthly, 'it was also suggested that an Oriental Language be made compulsory to enable students to learn a language and have pride in their culture' (pg.26), fifthly, 'it was also stated that liberal thinking should be encouraged and liberal ideas should be inculcated in students from an early age' (pg.10); and finally "the aim of a university should not be purely academic. If it were purely academic, it would have failed to perform a very important function, namely that of contributing towards the full development of the cultural life of the community" (Carr-Saunders Report 1948,pg.10). The Committee further emphasized the following:

It is the aim of a university education to enlarge the sphere of interest, to sharpen sensibility, to quicken perceptivity and to deepen sympathy' amongst its students. A university is not only a teaching establishment; its aim is education in the broadest sense. The student obtains or ought to obtain, not merely "the sort of knowledge and intellectual capacity that can be tested by examination but also general intellectual, moral and social qualities which can never be tested" and "I hope that there will be plenty of politics among the students, politics full of natural vehemence and exuberance of young people together -politics with a regard for principle and a delight in producing telling and relevant facts. A country which discourages political enthusiasm among its students will have its political movements led by illiterate malcontents twenty years later"(in *perpetuity*) (Carr-Saunders Report 1948,pg.27-30).

Following the recommendations of Carr-Saunders Report 1948, University of Malaya was born with these philosophies as the bedrock of its undergraduate education. Undergraduate education was more than just CGPA results but it was towards a journey realizing the potentials, discovery, "creativity and growth" and making *a human* for each undergraduate student. The undergraduate education 'achievement' was about the learning process, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for larger purpose for their lives and to leave universities as better human beings and

not by the end result of merely graduation and employment. Academic 'achievement' was measured by the universities abilities for equipping students with the knowledge and habits of mind that will make them wise and productive adults (Lewis, 2007). But undergraduate education in the University of Malaya has lost its direction in the process of competition for research excellence and optimization. Rarely do the structures framing undergraduate education and 'achievement' speak of responsible citizenship or our obligation to leave the world a better place (Lewis, 2007). Academics may then complain about students' materialism, when universities themselves are responsible for the vacuum in the institutional atmosphere (Lewis, 2007). It is as though the climate and policies of universities forces them to take a position between teaching and research. So, totally has the goal of scholarly excellence overshadowed universities' educational role that they have forgotten that the two need not be in conflict (Lewis, 2007). The critical point to be made is that there can be a balance between teaching and research, where undergraduate teaching can be improved without compromising the scholarly excellence. Therefore, when we attempt to answer the question whether there is gender gap in academic 'achievement' at the undergraduate level, we need assess and measure not in one-size fits all approach but a more nuance and against the larger philosophical framework of higher education.

Intersectionality between the Gender Gap, Academic Achievement and the Role of Higher Education

Mostly, populist reports, discourses and past research on the issue of gender gap in academic achievement at undergraduate level, focuses solely on the 'masculine or objective measures' of CGPA, examination results of the students and also the 'failing boys discourse or neo-disadvantaged group' with clear divorce from the fundamentals of undergraduate education from the philosophical framework (Skelton, C. 1998; Martino, W. & Berrill, D. 2003; Jha and Kelleher 2006).

Broader views of higher educational aims and achievement, such as increased understanding, social competence, citizenship, extension and diversification of abilities and so on, are marginalised and effectively invalidated by the hegemony of performance terminology and focus (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Mahony (1998) relates what she refers to as the 'obsession with academic achievement' to the rise of 'competition state'; and the neo-liberal implication of education as ensuring human capital in a competitive global economic climate. In the wake of how public universities are driven by neo-capitalist policies, they are forced to take an 'either or stand' in terms of research and undergraduate education (Lewis, 2006).

Therefore, the conceptual framework in any measurement of gender gap in academic achievement at the undergraduate level should include an analysis which is broader and qualitative in nature that is able to reflect whether the university has successfully delivered its mission and the philosophical aims of higher education. It is argued that past discourses and analysis on gender gap in academic achievement has been skewed, narrowed and in fact perpetuates the gendered education element. Such analysis were being measured and determined solely against straight-jacket rankings, employment and marketability; good grades and examinations and how the present induced consumerist society view the role of public university and purpose of undergraduate education. The lack of employing a balance, broader and multidimensional conceptual framework to

analyse this 'apparent phenomenon'²⁰ which captures the intersectionality between the gender gap, academic achievement and role of higher education, marks a delusion and misrepresentation to inform educational and socio-economic policies and also charting a loss of direction for the university in this aspect.

In this regard, feminist scholars and thinkers are able to provide a new breath to the conceptual framework of intersectionality above by providing a deeper and more inclusive notion of the philosophical role of higher education and the definition of educated person by recognizing the historical context of patriarchy, power relations and gender socialization which permeates into 'how do we know what we know and where do we know what we know'. For example, from a paper presented by Ziba Mir Hosseini (2012)²¹, the work of Perry (1970)²², which developed a model of understanding based on 15 years of study how college students come to understand 'knowledge' and the ideas they hold about 'knowing', only included male students analysis but omitted female students analysis because it was said that it will 'complicate' the results (Ziba Mir Hosseini 2012, pg.7). However, Gilligan (1982) critiqued the mainstream psychological theories in which women usually occupy lower stages than men in development and she further argued that since men dominate the discussion of moral theory, women's perspective is often not taken seriously and is thus considered to be less developed²³. Based on extensive research interviews, Gilligan (1982) argues that women's approach to moral thinking are marked by concerns for care, responsibilities and connectedness (*feminine traits*), whilst men's approach was marked by concerns for rights, autonomy and separateness (*masculine traits*) (Gilligan 1982, pg34). However, our mainstream higher education assessment, only endorses academic achievement that has traits and qualities which are 'masculine' and omitting the aspects of 'feminine'. Besides that, turning the whole of education into a highly intellectual enterprise aimed at the development of mind, they neglect the roles played in education by feeling and emotion. From the standpoint of feminist theory this reductionist agenda disregards care, concern and nurturance. The hidden curriculum in education reinforces the learning of gender roles and stereotypes. Rich (1977) and Martin (1981;1986;1994) have been the most attentive to the gendered character of education.

During the convocation speech Rich (1977) stresses the following: "one of the devastating weaknesses of university learning, of the store of knowledge and opinion that has been handed down through academic training, has been its almost total erasure of women's experience and thought from the curriculum, and its exclusion of women as members of the academic community" (Rich 1977, pg.1). Following that, Martin (1986) questioned the gendered construction of education and what the 'legitimate' function of education by asking: "Why do we subscribe to an ideal of the educated person that gives pride of place to intellectual virtues and attainments only? Couldn't education develop intellectual virtues and also the feelings, emotions, values, and attitudes the future requires? Of course it could, but our assumptions about the function of education do not allow us to conceive of the educated person in this inclusive way" (Martin 1986, pg.7).

Therefore, as a feminist and educationist philosopher, Martin (1994) critiqued strongly the ideal of educated person which was described by R.S. Peters²⁴. R.S. Peters and most of his work of 'educated man' stem from the definition of the following paradigm:

masculine ideal of the educated person which coincides with our cultural stereotype of a male human being and cognitive virtues;
 stereotype men are objective, analytic, rational, they are interested in ideas and things; they have no interpersonal orientation; they are neither nurturant nor supportive, empathetic or sensitive;
 according to this stereotype, nurturance and supportiveness, empathy and sensitivity are female attributes. Intuition is a female attribute too (Martin 1994, pg.40).

As crude as it is, this often springs from households, reports, media or higher education institutions, stereotypical expressions but more importantly the conditioning meanings and functions of gendered education, for example, Martin (1986), describes the 'norm'; 'imagine a woman who is analytical and critical, whose intellectual curiosity is strong, who cares about the canons of science and maths. How is she described? She thinks like a man, it is said. She will be seen as unfeminine (Martin 1986, pg.6). Therefore, Martin (1994, pg.80) redefined and reconstructed the concept of 'ideal educated person' which is more inclusive and 'real'. She argues that there has to be these four elements when one is attempting to define an 'ideal educated person':

which does not divorce the mind from body, thought from action, and reason from feeling and emotion;
 educated person should be in whom; head, hand and heart are integrated;
 must be concern of the outcomes of education which includes contingent relationships and not only logical relationships;
 not only concern for purely conceptual knowledge but also value question that entails both good life and the good society (Martin 1994, pg.82)

Martin (1994, pg.70) argues that the mainstream education only stresses on the 'education of the mind'. She argues that 'education of the mind' is inadequate if it ignores 'generative love' (pg.71). The mainstream idea of education does not include nurturing capacities and the 'ethics of care', physical capacities, artistic talents, effective moral action, care, concern and connection' (Martin 1982, pg.50). If the above mainstream measures or assessment or continuously assumed as the aims of education and higher education which serves as bedrock to educational institution, Martin warns the detriment to humanity at large because such foundation is not able to sustain itself and 'it is far too narrow and will harm both sexes' (Martin 1994 pg.78).

In terms of the philosophy of higher education, bell hooks (2010), a passionate and vigorous feminist scholar, continuously sees higher education as a 'practice of freedom' and a 'transformative process of oneself' and not as a 'process of imprisonment' through her extensive experience as a learner and educator who questions the issues of gender, race and class (hooks 2010, pg.3). According to bell hooks (2010, pg.4), the curiosity of students and their ability to think about the 'who, what, when, why of live' comes to a stop when they enter classrooms of learning institutions including the higher learning institutions. Most students tend to go through the process of higher learning, assuming that they should not be doing any thinking but to consume information and regurgitate it at the moment when they are assessed, with the exceptional of few classes that encourages this 'treasure' of critical thinking (bell hooks 2010, pg.8). There is a sought of assumption that critical thinking is a given but in reality, students need to learn how to think critically and how to apply it in all aspects of their lives. hooks

(2010) remind us that: “critical thinkers are clear as to the purpose at hand and question at issue. They question information, conclusions and point of view. They strive to be clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. They seek to think beneath the surface, to be logical and fair. They apply these skills to their reading and writing as well to their speaking and listening” (hooks 2010, pg.9).

Besides that, hooks (2010) has eloquently described the universal ‘nature’ of passive learning which has taken dominance and center-stage in higher learning in which students resist the critical thinking process, deconstruction and keeping an open mind (hooks 2010). According to bell hooks, “a radical commitment to openness maintains the integrity of the critical thinking process and its central role in education” (hooks, pg.10). Coupled with that, ‘democratic education’ is also seen as one of the major role of higher education (hooks, 2010, pg.14). She cautioned that ‘democratic education’ is being undermined in the interests of big business and corporate capitalism which blatantly encourage students to see education solely as means to achieve material success, gains and careers. She is of the view that we are at a critical moment in history where ‘democratic education’ should be promoted and encouraged to flourish, in which it entails ‘principles and values in democratic consciousness of free speech, dissent, pluralist opinions in theory and practice’ (hooks 2010, pg.16). hooks (2010) critiques the higher learning institutions as institutions which preserve and perpetuate status quo and hierarchies. She sees education as ‘a tool of colonization that serves to teach students allegiance to the status quo has been much the accepted norm that no blame can be attributed to the huge body of educators who simply taught as they were taught’ (hooks 2010, pg.27). bell hooks invites us to ‘decolonise our minds and imagination’ to seek the truth and this liberation of higher education is an on-going process (hooks 2010, pg 29).

Hooks (1994) investigated the classroom as a source of constraint but also a potential source of liberation. She argued that teachers’ use of control and power over students dulls the students’ enthusiasm and teaches obedience to authority, “confi[n]g each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning” (hooks 1994, pg.23). She advocates for universities to encourage students and teachers to transgress, and sought ways to use collaboration to make learning more relaxing and exciting. She described teaching as ‘a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged’ (hooks 1994, pg.55).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of gender gap in academic achievement at the undergraduate level needs to be developed against the backdrop of the larger and nuanced conceptual framework of ‘intersectionality’ which looks at gender gap, academic achievement and the philosophical role of higher education in a university that takes into account feminist theories of educated person and the process of epistemologies and not reduced to ‘masculine’ objective measures of achievement. It is imperative that a redefinition of educated person and ‘legitimising’ of epistemological process that is more inclusive, balance and holistic approach that takes into account both women and men experiences in knowing and learning in reconstructing the philosophical framework of higher education in a university.

The over emphasis of higher education in the university for employability and entrepreneurship led by neo-capitalism will not wield a holistic, balance and sustenance in the long run in terms of nation building and in making a just, equal and peaceful community. Higher education at the public university level in Malaysia especially University of Malaya needs to redefine its direction that weaves the values of humanity and ensures a strong philosophical essence of 'educated person' in its process of construction and production of knowledge. University education needs to be more holistic, balance and sustainable and not to be 'trapped' in the 'market-driven' game.

Notes

- ¹ Maimuna Hamid Merican is a 'teacher' at the Gender Studies Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. Email: maimuna_merican@um.edu.my
- ² It is to be noted that higher education in this article refers specifically to undergraduate university education and not to other higher educational institutions like university colleges, polytechnics, technical vocational centres and community-colleges.
- ³ See further *Muhyiddin: M'sian varsities must attain world top 100 ranking to attract more locals*. The Star, 11 November 2012. Available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2012/11/11/nation/20121111191002&sec=nation> Accessed 1 December 2012
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Available at <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2012> Accessed 15 October 2012
- ⁶ Carnegie Commission on Higher Education was established by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1967 to study and make recommendations regarding the major issues facing American higher education. For more information, see "*Rethinking and Reframing the Carnegie Classification*," *Change*, September-October 2005. Available at: <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/downloads/rethinking.pdf>, Accessed 2 May 2010.
- ⁷ Boulton, K.G. and Lucas, L. 2008. *What Are Universities For?* Amsterdam: Leagues of European Research Universities
- ⁸ Paper presented by Anna Glass, Secretary General of Magna Carta Observatory, Bologna, Italy at the Asia-Pacific Academic Conference (APAC) organised by University of Malaya Academic Staff Association, Kuala Lumpur, 6-7 November 2012. For further information, see <http://blogakademikmalaysia.blogspot.com/>. Assessed 4 November 2012
- ⁹ For further information on Magna Charta Universitatum, see <http://www.magna-charta.org/>. Assessed 6 November 2012
- ¹⁰ Ibid, pg 4.
- ¹¹ Ibid, pg.5
- ¹² Ibid, pg 4.
- ¹³ Second thrust of Ninth Malaysia Plan is 'raising the capacity for knowledge and innovation and nurture 'first-class mentality' (pg23-24). For further information, see http://www.parlimen.gov.my/news/eng-ucapan_rmk9.pdf Assessed 15 December 2012
- ¹⁴ Under the Budget 2013, the Government allocated RM500 million for the 'The Graduate Career Accelerated Programme' (GCAP). This GCAP been introduced to improve the employability of unemployed graduates, is a skills upgrading training programme designed to transform graduates into highly-employable executives for the service industry. See further <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2012/10/15/nation/12173445&sec=nation> Assessed 17 December 2012
- ¹⁵ *The Star*. 29th November 2012.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.

- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ See further <http://www.projectmalaysia.org/articles/the-role-of-higher-education.html> Assessed 19 May 2012
- ²⁰ This 'apparent phenomenon' refers to the discourse and reports on gender gap in academic achievement at the undergraduate level.
- ²¹ Paper presented by Ziba Mir Hosseini. 2012. Women's Ways of Knowing: Developing Feminist Epistemologies. *Sisters In Islam Training*. 26-27 June. Kuala Lumpur. See further www.zibamirhosseini.com and <http://www.musawah.org/>
- ²² Ibid. Perry. W. 1970. Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme _____
- ²³ Op cit. No.20.
- ²⁴ See further Martin, J. R. 1986. Redefining the Educated Person: Rethinking the Significance of Gender. *Educational Researcher*. 15(1). Special Issue. The New Scholarship on Women in Education. Pg.6-10. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1175492> Assessed 19 June 2012

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