Article

The Idea of a University: Rethinking the Malaysian Context

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Abstract: This article explores the idea of a university with a specific focus in the Malaysian context. We begin the article guided by these questions—"What is a university?" and "What are universities for?"—in examining the historical and conceptual development of universities. This is followed by asking a more specific question—"What are Malaysian universities for?"—in which we discussed the overarching roles of public and private universities in this developing country. Having examined the roles of public and private universities, and taken into context the complexity and challenges surrounding these important societal institutions, we discuss two "experimental" initiatives in Malaysia: the APEX University (Accelerated Program for Excellence) focusing on sustainability and the "humaniversity". On the one hand, these initiatives are intended to prepare and transform Malaysian universities to address not only the needs of society today, but critically, of tomorrow. On the other hand, they have implications and contributions to frame our thinking about the future ideas of a university not only in Malaysia, but regionally and globally.

Keywords: idea of a university; universities in Malaysia; sustainability; humaniversity

1. Introduction

The university is an institution that matters to everyone in society. This is the single most important institutional medium for conserving, understanding, extending and passing on the intellectual, scientific, and artistic heritage from one generation to the next in society [1]. This institution is synonymous with the growth of civilization. In line with the formation of nation-states, universities are seen to be symbols of national pride, particularly in demonstrating a nation's intellectual and innovative capacity. The university is a highly complex societal institution that has evolved from the pre-medieval age to the modern era, and the university will likely continue its transformation into the future.

This paper seeks to revisit the idea of a university with a specific focus on this societal institution in the context of Malaysia. Malaysia is a developing country with the vision to become a high-income economy that is inclusive and sustainable, and to establish a progressive society that is scientific and innovative. This vision was first articulated in the Vision 2020 and subsequently operationalized in the New Economic Model [2]. Universities have a crucial role to play to achieve this vision and, therefore, it is important that a clear thinking of the idea of these institutions in the context of Malaysia is needed before a clear and desired future path can be charted.

This paper consists of four parts. First, we revisit the idea of a university from a historical perspective to examine the word "university", particularly what it is and what it is intended for. Second, we explore the roles and views of universities, guided by the question: "What are universities for?" This is followed by the third section which examines the idea of a university for the Malaysian context in relation to public and private universities, and specifically illustrates two case studies that are experimental initiatives of "business unusual" with the hope to provoke critical thoughts to shape the thinking of the idea of university for Malaysia and other developing countries. The final section of the paper will discuss the way forward.

2. "University"

The term "university" as an educational institution needs no further elaboration. However, discussions on the idea of a university are often debated. We cannot help but to ask: What is a university?

The term "university" was coined from the Latin word—*universitas*—and was used to refer to the University of Bologna that was established in Italy in 1088. Due to the fact that this is the first institution to be termed as a university, some have claimed that it is the first university in the world. The establishment of a university in Bologna was followed by similar institutions in Paris, Oxford and Cambridge (in the middle of the twelfth century). Some scholars have claimed that the university that exists today is a European legacy, whereby it is "the only European institution which has preserved its fundamental patterns and its basic social role and functions over the course of history" ([3], p. xix).

However, the concept of university as a center of learning had existed several centuries before Bologna. In India, Nalanda has been recognized as one of the most ancient international centers of education and learning, with library and accommodation facilities in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., equivalent to what we now consider as a university [4]. Nalanda was recognized for its illustrious contribution to education based on a different construct to meet the socio-cultural and religious needs of its society, and it did not subscribe to being the "trustee of the European humanist

tradition" [5] like Bologna and other European medieval universities. Similarly, the *Akademia* founded by Plato in 387 B.C.E. in Athens epitomizes a center of education and learning equivalent to a university of the modern age. Yet, what remains today in Nalanda and *Akademia* are archaeological sites that once underlined the grandeur and prestige of these centers of education despite not having the term "university" associated with them.

Yet, there is an exception in Fez, Morocco. The UNESCO recognizes the Medina of Fez as a World Heritage Centre, and home to the oldest university in the world given the fact that it is the first institution to award degrees [6]. The University of al-Qarawiyyin was founded in 859 B.C.E. by a lady named Fatima al-Fihri as a *madrasah*—a center of learning for religious studies. The *madrasah* was built on a *waqf* (irrevocable public endowment) concept and this arrangement has assured this university of its survival. Since 1963, University of al-Qarawiyyin has become a state university in Morocco.

Clearly, the idea of a center of education and learning supersedes the term "university". Importantly, these centers of education, as well as medieval universities in Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, were ecclesiastical, with *Akademia* as the possible exception [1,3]. Nalanda and Fez were centers of education based in Buddhism and Islam respectively, while the European medieval universities had close relations with the Church and one of their major responsibilities was to train clerics to serve in various capacities in the Church. Even the famous advocate of liberal education and the author of the book, *The Idea of a University*—John Henry Newman—stated in a clear manner that, "education must not be disjoined from religion" ([7], p. 371), despite believing that a university is responsible for intellectual education, and practically inseparable from the Church which functioned as some form of check-and-balance to the university. In essence, the idea of university in the medieval times was mainly constructed around it being a center of education and learning with strong religious influence, and is not the construct of a university we know now.

Scholars argue that the universities we observe today are "modern" universities. One of the characteristics of the "modern" university is one which departs from the control and influence of religion [8], and research has become a crucial part in the defining purpose of the university [1]. The link between teaching and research in the university can be traced back to the idea of a university formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt, the then Prussian Minister of Education, who founded the University of Berlin in 1810. The famously known Humboldtian principles include: unity of research and teaching, solitude and freedom, and community of teachers and students [9]. Research, therefore, has become a central part of the university in advancing and expanding knowledge fields across all disciplines.

Not only has research and teaching become the essential functions of a "modern" university, but the roles and functions of a university have multiplied since then, to the point that has led to the introduction of the term "multiversity" by the Chancellor of the California university system, Clark Kerr in 1963 in trying to reflect the huge variety of activities carried out in a university.

While this is indeed the case, more recently many have raised concerns on the destruction of the university system even in the developed and advanced democracies of the West. This is perhaps an indication that the current ideas and models of the university have been influenced by more recent events in the geopolitical world of education. American linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky's rendering of "How America's Great University System Is Being Destroyed" to a level of the "Walmart model" on 28 February 2014 speaks volumes of the vulnerability of the universities today [10].

This leads us on to examine the next question: What are universities for?

3. Roles and Views of University

The term "multiversity" was coined to describe specifically the American research university, where the institution was expected to demonstrate:

> …how adaptive it can be to new opportunities for creativity; how responsive to money; how eagerly it can play a new and useful role; how fast it can change while pretending that nothing has happened at all…([11], pp. 34–35).

While Humboldt coupled teaching and research, Kerr envisioned the university to further broaden its roles into service as well as having an economic role in the knowledge business. The university has also become much more sensitive to external relations and is required to be consistently productive. At the same time, it experiences much inconsistency internally. The university, as Kerr further argues, is neither fully private nor public, and "the internal illusion is that it is a law unto itself but the external reality is that it is governed by history" ([11], p. 71). A "multiversity", Kerr postulates that "the university is so many things to so many people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself" ([11], p. 7).

One of the major roles of the university, which Kerr outlined, was its economic role of knowledge to the economy and society. In a knowledge-driven economy, the role of university is not only confined to the dissemination of knowledge through teaching but, importantly, to the creation of new knowledge and expansion of the existing knowledge base through research activities, as well as the promotion and dissemination of knowledge to society through teaching and service. At the same time, the education of students in university has seen the shift from its role of developing learned citizens to one of producing skilled knowledge workers. Doctoral students, previously seen as the next generation of disciplinary experts and academics in university, are now considered to be advanced knowledge workers in the economy [12]. The economic dimension of university has never been emphasized as strongly in the entire history of this societal institution, and this important economic role has been the justification and rationale advocating for further development and expansion of universities [13–15].

Apart from the religious and economic dimensions, the role of the university and its relation to the non-university environment can be categorized into four conflicting views [16]. The views were coined: Sober, Creative, Purist and Social. First, the Sober view postulates the university as another knowledge-based institution; one which is not fundamentally different from other knowledge-based businesses and industries. The only difference a university has with other knowledge-based institutions perhaps lies in its having a greater number and a wider range of experts dealing with knowledge.

Second, the Creative view is much more optimistic which posits university as the societal institution that should be concerned most essentially with optimizing and nurturing the creative potential of individuals. To foster an environment that allows creativity to flourish, the university will need to seek dialogue with outside partners to allow for stimulus and fresh perspectives, and at the same time, seek to have sufficient resources, time, and space for innovative research and development.

Third, the Purist view is grounded in Humboldtian principles. The university is expected to maintain a critical distance from social, political and economic forces, like an ivory tower, to enable

the institution to optimize its innovation and provide an objective "early warning potential". Although the process of research and teaching may be carried out away from the "real world", the university is by no means secluded from engaging with society. Knowledge has still to be transmitted and shared with its stakeholders and the outside world, whilst maintaining the needed critical distance for university to be objective which, in the long run, may bring benefits and more focused growth to the university.

Fourth, the Social view suggests the university as a crucial and critical counterbalance to dominant governing forces. These may be market forces, societal attitudes and norms, as well as political and administrative forces. The role of the university within the Social view is to widen the access to knowledge and its benefits to society. This will require the university to identify problems, offer solutions to complex societal concerns, and define future developments through dialogue and engagement with diverse actors and stakeholders. This idea closely resonates with what is currently expected of a university where "community engagement" and/or "social responsibility" is being considered to be the "third mission" of tertiary education, apart from teaching and research. Indeed, the diverse models of the University are being debated is yet another strong indication that the idea of a university is still evolving with time. This includes ideas to "decolonize" universities in the search for a non-Western model, especially in developing countries [17].

Having examined the roles and views of a university, the next section focuses on the idea of the University in the Malaysian context focusing on the question: What are Malaysian universities for?

4. Malaysian Universities and Their Roles

Malaysia has a relatively short, yet interesting, history in the development of its universities. Higher education began with the recommendation of the Carr-Saunders Commission on university education in Malaya to establish the University of Malaya in Singapore. This university was established in 1949 and was "modelled after the tertiary educations in the United Kingdom of Great Britain in term of academic system and administrative structure". In 1959, an autonomous campus was set up in Kuala Lumpur and became a full-fledged university in 1962, retaining the name University of Malaya. By early 1970s, an additional four public universities were established in Malaysia, and another two were added to the list of public universities in the 1980s. To date, there are twenty public universities in Malaysia, which are further categorized into research universities, comprehensive universities and focused universities, and these Malaysian public universities continued to be predominantly "Western" with a combination of British legacy, American influence, and indigenization of the local culture [18].

Apart from public universities, the enactment of the Private Higher Education Institutions Act in 1996 has laid the path for the establishment and recognition of private higher education institutions. The latest statistics indicate that there are seventy private universities and thirty-four private university colleges in Malaysia [19]. These private institutions include for-profit and non-profit private universities, as well as international branch campuses of foreign universities in the United Kingdom, Australia and China. Soon, branch campuses from Middle-Eastern universities are expected to follow suit. Japan has a semblance of a branch campus under a joint arrangement called the Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIIT).

The Malaysian higher education system has made a clear distinction between public and private institutions, where such institutions are regulated and governed by different legislation and in different

ways by the State and by the Ministry of Education. Importantly, these institutions also have differing roles and expectations. The Ministry of Education sees these institutions as being complementary rather than being competitive with each other. They are viewed by the State to be bound to the same National Education Philosophy that aspires to nurture a balanced human person, or *insan seimbang* in the national language, *Bahasa Melayu*. This balanced human person is viewed to be the ultimate outcome of higher education, one who offers his or her service and contribution to the family, community, and nation.

4.1. Public Universities

Public universities have seen their roles evolving across time. In the late-1950s and 1960s, the role of public universities was to prepare bureaucrats and professionals for the new post-independent nation. But the only university then, the University of Malaya, was highly elitist, where only 323 students were enrolled in 1959 with the number increasing to 4560 in 1967 [18]. However, the role of public universities changed following the introduction of the *New Economic Policy* to eradicate poverty and to restructure society by redressing the then economic imbalances among the ethnic groups. Public universities in Malaysia, from that point onwards, have been tasked as a crucial means to redress the divisive ethnic disparities through capacity building and social mobility. To further ensure that public universities are able to fulfil this crucial task for the nation, the number of public universities and students in these institutions has been increased. Importantly, public universities have been almost fully financially supported by the State, which have enabled these institutions to focus on capacity building and social mobility, and to charge minimal student fees.

On top of the roles of nation building, teaching, research and service, these public universities are expected to compete for national prestige in the global rankings of universities. The *Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015–2025* (MEBHE) has set as the nation's goal that by 2025, at least one Malaysian university is to be ranked among the top 25 in Asia, two Malaysian universities in the global top 100, and four Malaysian universities in the global top 200 [19]. However, even prior to the MEBHE and its predecessor the *National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007–2020* (NHESP), there have been concerns voiced about the lack of Malaysian universities in the top 100 rankings [20], and in fact, one of the strategic responses for Malaysian universities to compete globally was envisaged through the Malaysian Research Universities (MRU) program. The APEX (Accelerated Program for Excellence) initiative was introduced to spearhead innovations and what was seen to be meaningful transformations in the Malaysian higher education landscape. The APEX initiative will be discussed in Section 4.3 (Case 1) as it embodies the Malaysian philosophy of the idea of a university.

4.2. Private Universities

Private universities were expected by the State to fulfil a primarily economic role. While public universities have been viewed to fulfil the developmental and nation-building purposes, private universities have been planned to fully utilize the economic potentials of higher education. For instance, private universities are allowed to charge fees that ensure profitability and financial sustainability and do not need to address the socio-economic and political needs of society. Private universities are allowed to

attract more international students as they do not have to meet targets for domestic students as required in public institutions.

In addition, private universities are able to cater to students who are unable to enter public universities due to particular entry requirements. The admission into public universities is generally competitive and focuses on academic performance and involvement in co-curricular activities in secondary education. Such admission systems tend to favor girls over boys, and may be one factor that has contributed to the 60:40 ratio of female and male students in public universities. However, as private universities have a more flexible and less stringent admission system, the gender ratio in these private institutions is almost equal at 51:49 [21]. The different gender proportion in public and private universities illustrates a complementary role undertaken by private universities in Malaysia. At times, however, it can also work counter-purpose to the national agenda of trying to close the gender and socio-economic gaps among the various ethnic groups. The demographic distribution of students in private institutions tends to be polarized to a specific ethnic group and related to income relative to that in the public institution.

Further, as the medium of instruction of private universities is in English and the possibility of earning a foreign degree through twinning programs increases enrolling in private universities has become a preferred choice especially for those who can afford it. In this respect, private universities are directly competing with public universities for students, where the latest enrolment figure is 54 percent and 46 percent in public and private institutions respectively.

4.3. Case Studies of New Initiatives

While public and private universities have general roles to fulfil, there have been some initiatives among Malaysian universities to explore new ways of doing the University. In this section, we will explore two examples of such. The discussion addresses the more immediate and broader global agenda as pursued by the United Nations, for example, Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014). Other examples are the Education for All program, and the Millennium Development Goals, both of which have 15-year timeframe (2000–2015) [22]. Moving forward the influence of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals is vital. While Malaysia is committed to meet this agenda satisfactorily, Malaysia continues to live through a crisis of scale that affects all systems and that requires a new understanding of human progress and a new conscience that supports a new way of being in the world as illustrated by the two cases below. However, these two cases are by no means a representation of the development in the Malaysian higher education system. Instead, these cases seek to illuminate the experimental initiatives undertaken in a public and private university respectively, that importantly, point towards some plausible directions in thinking of the future idea of a Malaysian university.

Case 1: The APEX University

The idea of an APEX University was mooted in 2007 as part of NHESP as mentioned above. It is a bold move to engage Malaysia in a very forward-looking exercise for the future world of education. The creation and development of relevant education model(s) could contribute to transforming the paradigms and beliefs established in social, economic and political systems by simultaneously shaping

new and innovative ways of thinking and imagining new realities. In the NHESP, therefore, the APEX University was given broader institutional as well as instructional latitudes to put in place mechanisms that are able to transform the university to produce a template of a 21st century world-class university [23,24]. The institutional and instructional latitudes offered through the APEX initiative can be summed up by three "A"s—autonomy, accountability and audit.

Autonomy is the full-fledged institutional autonomy that allows the university to "reinvent" itself into an institution that would pioneer and translate new ideas into practice with respect to education in the 21st century within the realm envisaged by UNESCO [25]. This means while it is fully accountable academically (for example "publish-or-perish"), it also goes beyond the conventional academic practices to include greater societal engagement as part of instructional in the attempt to transform and enhance community well-being. This is done through another axiom of "do-or-die" by co-creating and co-developing "new" knowledge in tandem with that indigenous community based on indigenous wisdom. All these are subjected to periodic and rigorous auditing (and learning) in ensuring that the APEX initiative is in the right track and it stated goals are well within target. At the level of the Department of Higher Education, however, some other aspects were also enumerated, which are generally not out of the ordinary [26].

In this regard, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was awarded the status as an APEX University in 2008 with the overarching theme of *Transforming Higher Education for a Sustainable Tomorrow* where USM aspires to be world renowned for championing sustainability and to be a sustainability-led university [27]. By realigning the APEX initiative to that of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the ultimate goal is to develop a university model that embraces the nexus of ecology-economy-society-culture beyond the narrow economic dimension and market logic of previous models, increasingly taking a neoliberal slant. This is to allow for other articulations directed to addressing the many divides especially in the realm of education in general, and higher education in particular. The idea of the "bottom billion" [22] is introduced to act as the catch-phrase underpinning the concern that the poor and disadvantaged as being the most vulnerable group, hence is worthy of focus through the APEX initiative locally, regionally, and internationally.

In other words, in the APEX initiative the idea to be world-class is not defined by dominant neoliberal concerns of occupying better positions in university rankings or league tables, but more in terms of addressing and providing sustainable solutions to the more immediate global problems in the areas of health care and poverty, for example. This is the underlying strategic idea that led to USM receiving the APEX University status through an open and transparent bidding process managed by a group of local and international experts. The choice of USM as the APEX status university is recognized as unique and befitting to the demands of the 21st century. Indeed, it fits well with the UNESCO's view when it admitted that:

> Our current knowledge base does not contain the solutions to contemporary global environmental, societal and economic problems. …ESD promotes efforts to rethink educational programmes and systems (both methods and contents) that currently support unsustainable societies. ESD affects all components of education: legislation, policy, finance, curriculum, instruction, learning, assessment, *etc.* ESD calls for lifelong learning and recognises the fact that the educational needs of people change over their lifetime. [And] to

create solutions and find new paths to a better future [that] can be implemented in many culturally appropriate forms [25].

This statement adds to the evidence that the idea of university will continue to evolve according to the demands to time and the worldview of the day, although the true ethos of university in general does not change as such. This corresponds well with USM's APEX mission statement that reads: USM is a pioneering, transdisciplinary research intensive university that empowers future talent and enables the "bottom billions" to transform their socio-economic well-being.

In other words, the APEX University initiative is a stark departure from the conventional way of striving for world-class status based on select predetermined key performance indicators (KPIs) or a one-size-fits-all criterion. Instead, USM's APEX plan takes into considerations the immeasurable aspects of education known as key intangible performances (KIPs) where contribution made to alleviate poverty and social deprivation among the "bottom billions" based on the principles of ESD will be acknowledged, recognized and weighted in as successful impact [23]. Various millennial projects were also instituted in making the APEX initiative more meaningful towards mainstreaming ESD across the institution. Among them include a set of activities and programs to promote sustainability such as the University in a Garden, *Kampus Sejahtera* (Healthy Campus), a transdisciplinary approach to problem solving and USM community partnership programs using a bottom up approach [28].

What is interesting is that the APEX model has very close resemblance to that of the New Economic Model mentioned above where sustainability is one of the major components [2,29] (see Figures 1 and 2). The two models could support one another in raising ethical awareness and facilitating the civic commitment to ESD as well as to ignite rethinking of the social responsibility of higher education in particular. Figure 3 in particular combines the set of ideas from Figures 1 and 2 and the global into one that is "glocal" predicted on the slogan "think global, act local". The elements of "high-value flagships" for example is to enable the university to support Malaysia in its endeavor to continue to move on an upward socio-economic trajectory but at the same time co-create opportunity for greater global prosperity through partnerships and collaborations. Malaysia's expertise in agricultural sector in the areas of rubber and palm oil research are two classical examples where the "glocal" approaches have shown results. In this respect, the APEX initiative has earmarked seven world's first projects as its "high-value flagships" to be nurtured and developed. The "new" expertise contextualized within the framework of "inclusiveness" at the national level, has a potential outreach to the "bottom billion" if "political will" at the global level could be assured in garnering support for a wider collaboration and partnering. This will impact humanity as a whole beyond any single boundary, especially in juxtaposing the planetary perspectives with that of sustainability.

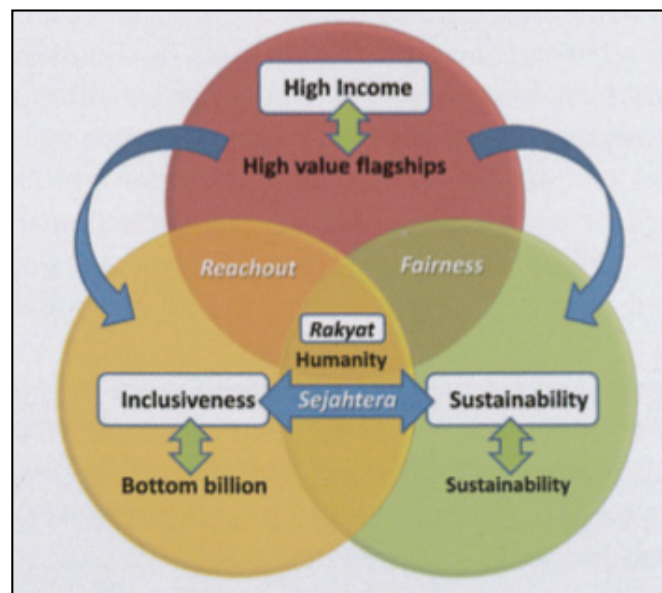**Figure 1.** APEX Agenda in the National Context. Source: ([29], p. xi).

Figure 2. APEX Transformation Goals and the New Economic Model. Source: ([29], p. xiv).
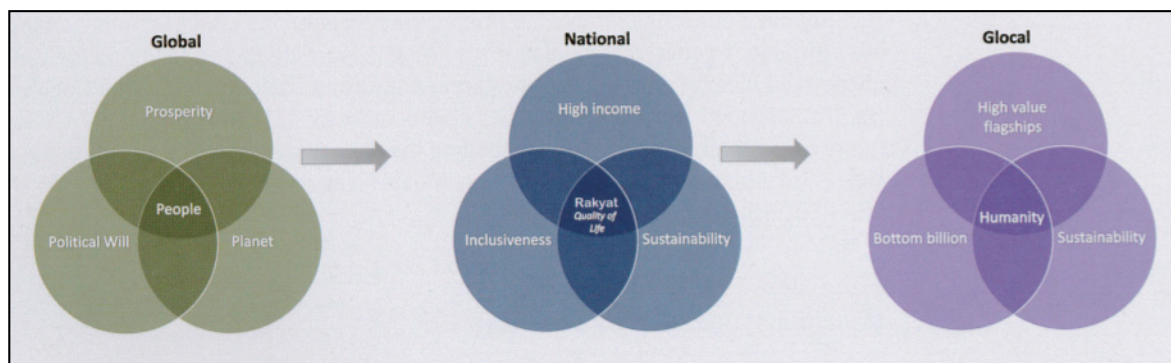

Figure 3. Sequence of Development of ESD Envisioned by USM. Source: ([29], p. x).

However, as acknowledged by the Chairman of the APEX University Selection Committee "the Malaysian setting is not an ideal environment to exert change" [24]. This remark was made in an interview after the announcement of USM as the APEX University. Given that this bold experiment is to be carried out in a public university, which has a much more rigid system and governing framework, the initiative encountered an even greater challenge to change. A public university in Malaysia is a federal statutory body, a semi-government entity having certain autonomy in decision making but activities are to be closely monitored and controlled by the respective ministries. Although USM's APEX plan is comprehensive to transform the university towards sustainability, which included governance and autonomy in terms of reducing restrictive rules and regulations, unnecessary bureaucratic procedures and external interference often act as major hindrances. Notwithstanding this, improving internal accountability and monitoring, implementing academic audits and peer review systems have been executed very well, with largely favorable and encouraging outcomes, though the implementation of these measures have been challenging. Overall it was reported that while accountability and audit exercises have been rigorous to assess and monitor the university, autonomy, as stated in the APEX plan, remained far-fetched [30].

Change requires cost. The shortage of funds to materialize the change has been attributed to one of the reasons USM has not fully realized its goal as envisioned under the APEX University plan [31]. However, in addition to the shortage of funds, the APEX transformation plan have been jeopardized by current national emphasis on KPIs and measurable indicators. Although the university successfully launched seven world's first discoveries and innovations, as its flagship for change ([32], pp. 155–242), including three pioneering genomic innovations on natural rubber and jute, two iconic archaeological discoveries and two *halal* innovations on meningitis tetravalent vaccine formulation and collagen production from sheep-skin. These discoveries and innovations are centered on the principle of ESD in terms of "documenting" and enhancing the application of biodiversity before it is irreversibly lost, and providing sharper focus to the benefit of the "bottom billions". Yet, the emphasis on intangibles and immeasurable KIPs has been overtaken by the demands to fulfilling KPIs and other measurable indicators, such as citation count and number of publications in particular types of journals, that are commonly used to tabulate university rankings and to define what is considered as a "world-class" university in what is seen to be oversimplified and naïve manner. This has led to a recent weakening of the idea inspired by the APEX initiative in attempting to create a possible template for a university of tomorrow and the gradual departure is evidenced in the lack of articulation of such an idea in the recently launched MEBHE.

Nevertheless, USM continued to journey into the second phase of the APEX plan. It is essential to note that the APEX plan was never about transforming USM into a world-class university in terms of rankings or other measurable indicators of success. Crucially, the plan is an innovative and experimental initiative to transform the university to become a "world-class" university in sustainability through ESD and fulfilling its potential as a public institution to the betterment of Malaysian and global society.

Case 2: The "Humaniversity"

Typically, private universities have been established in Malaysia to unleash the economic potential of the higher education market and some of these institutions play a complementary role to public universities in widening access to higher education. As noted earlier it has created some imbalances if the concentration lies heavily on fee-paying students from more privileged economic classes. However, there is a recently established private university which maintains a different overarching philosophy of "Devotion to God, Compassion to Humanity". This university began to enroll students in 2010. It has an explicit goal to change the lives of the poor which is very clearly spelt out in its vision and mission statements:

Vision

To become a model university characterized by high quality education and humanitarian values aimed at empowering underprivileged and disadvantaged students.

Mission

To provide academically qualified students from underprivileged and disadvantaged backgrounds not only quality education for them to succeed in life, but also an education which will result in their valuing discipline, being caring and giving individuals. [33].

These two statements conjecture the tagline—"the humaniversity," in the University's attempt to "humanize" the university by ensuring that human dignity is safe-guarded and kept intact [34–38].

The model of this particular university was conceptualized through *waqf*, an Islamic term referring to a public endowment, that is, the irrevocable voluntary dedication of one's wealth or a portion of it—in cash or kind for educational or charitable cause. Thus, the university charges no fees throughout the study duration for students who are generally from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. The main aim of this university is not just to produce human capital for the marketplace, like most conventional models of universities, but to produce human beings with the "soul" of education nourished through student experience in the university [34–38]. The university intends not just to educate and equip these students from the "bottom billions" with knowledge, skills, and capabilities to bring about change in their respective communities, leading to sustainable and inclusive societal development. This is made possible by using a specially designed *Humaniversity Competency Framework* intended to explore the critical dimensions in understanding the dominant and potential roles of knowledge, civil society and their relationship with higher education institutions in actively contributing to the creation of a more just, balanced and sustainable world [39]. The humaniversity model is in line with the global agenda, such as the eight Millennium Development Goals mostly geared to helping the poor and disadvantaged in attaining a better quality of life. The idea of a humaniversity, therefore, can be considered yet another feasible experimental initiative by a private university based on a markedly different idea and model.

While "the humaniversity" model has taken off without much hitch, academically, there is uncertainty as to the source of funds needed to materialize and sustain the growth of this idea. This is in addition to the tremendous peer pressure to conform to existing conventional norms, including by the bureaucracy, which is unable to cope with the radical changes promoted by this model. This is made even more challenged by the absence of patience and a lack of deep understanding of the stakeholders

on the new concept as a holistic transformational process, let alone that of the "humaniversity." Hence, to date the fate of this idea and model hangs precariously once other non-conventional measures of success and outcomes were introduced. This is because the present standard criteria for assessment is limited to the "ticked-box" exercise of which the "holistic transformational process" does not conform neatly. Notably among this is the three-year compulsory community work that all students were assigned to in a team of ten. The measures of success are monthly monitored, based on a 360-degree approach together with the community leaders and project partners based on a range of stated domains. There are no academic "grades" assigned, but rather a competency certification based on the level of outcomes attained using the 360-degree assessment approach. At the end of the day, it attempts to "measure" the behavioral change that the students have undergone through in learning to translate the knowledge acquired in a collective fashion for the desired impact, rather than what an individual could do and retain as conventionally carried out.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Globally, the idea and model of universities are changing to meet the needs of today and more critically, that of tomorrow. The university, as a center of learning, evolving from the pre-medieval ages to what we have today, will continue to evolve itself into the future. However, acknowledging the problems and challenges encountered by universities, globally, where criticisms have been raised about the sustainability of this societal institution, for instance as portrayed in the documentary *Ivory Tower* [40], as well as the multiple roles which universities are expected to undertake yet at times neglected, there is a vital need to rethink new ideas and future models for universities which are sustainable and relevant to socially-just societies.

New ideas of universities must be sensitive to this as the world's population grows, as resources diminish and disparities widen. At the 2010 High Level Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly for example, while reviewing progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, governments called for accelerating progress and for fresh thinking on ways to advance the development agenda beyond 2015. This has led to the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon taking several new initiatives. He has established a UN System Task Team, launched a High Level Panel of Eminent Persons and appointed his own Special Advisor on Post-2015 Development Planning. These processes are complemented by a set of eleven global thematic consultations and national consultations in 88 countries facilitated by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG). In all of these, universities must be closely involved and new and bold ideas are the only way to ensure that the university remains relevant to uphold the dignity of humanity through the "right" model of education befitting the 21st century and beyond.

In thinking of the way forward for global universities and Malaysian universities in particular, it is important to recognize that the previous ideas and models of university that are predominantly "Western" may have served tremendously well. The public universities have played a crucial part in building the nation and developing the capacity for Malaysia's development, while private universities have contributed to widen access into higher education and further unleash the economic potentials of the Malaysian higher education sector.

For Malaysian universities to remain relevant to society, the many roles, ideas, forms and structures of universities have to play their part. In terms of the research and service mission, the different universities in the Malaysian context can undertake the various roles of universities as viewed through the Social, Purist, Sober or Creative models. While the advocates of these models may have conflicting views, there is also common ground. Universities can mix and combine the features of these models in various permutations, especially in terms of knowledge creation and dissemination. For instance, public universities being funded by the State are better positioned to transform themselves into socially-driven institutions, but at the same time they can also become Creative institutions that drive the knowledge economy. Furthermore, becoming a Purist institution may not necessarily be at odds with being a Social, Sober or Creative institution. Instead, the plurality and diversity of Malaysian universities in terms of ideas, models, forms and structures may allow these institutions to further unleash their potentials in contributing to the growth and development of the nation.

In terms of the idea of a university as the center of learning through its teaching mission, what education is for Malaysian universities has to be rooted fundamentally in the National Education Philosophy (NEP). The higher education landscape is ever-changing and the NEP has to be flexible enough to accommodate them without having to compromise its core values and its overarching goal of nurturing a balanced human person. This has been given a new emphasis with the recently launched MEBHE which articulates the need for "holistic and balanced graduates with entrepreneurial mind" as the very first of the ten shifts envisaged for Malaysian universities in the next decade. Thus, this means that rethinking is imperative in making these shifts a reality, and new ideas are certainly sought after in making this happen.

The idea of universities, both globally and locally, that has been envisioned by thinkers before us, such as John H. Newman, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Clark Kerr, and many others, may have served us well in the past. While their ideas have shaped universities in their respective generations, and the ones after, there is a constant need for us to re-think the idea of a university and examine their possible roles and, specifically, what are Malaysian universities for? In doing so we need not confine our thinking to the dominant Western models for we have other alternatives or more generally non-Eurocentric models to envision future university models in Malaysia and the world [41–43].

We conclude with the quote from the late Sir David Watson, a renowned Professor of Higher Education and Principal of Green Templeton College at University of Oxford, where he expounded the importance of returning to the "founding" purposes of universities:

> I encourage universities looking at strategic options to return to their "founding" purposes, as reflected in charters, legislation and the like. You will very rarely find "prestige" as an objective there. Even if such concerns (and the drive for "world-classness") has more or less overwhelmed today's dialogue. Returning to our roots can help generate a more profound sense of social engagement for a higher education institute ([44], pp. xv–xvi).

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this paper, read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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