Education, Innovation and Social Change

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Higher education in Singapore, like that elsewhere in the developed world is currently undergoing a transformation due to competition, an emerging semi-mass rather than a semi-elite system, public accountability and globalisation. Technological advancements, general global interconnectivity and the globalisation of markets, including the delivery of higher education, have increased the demand for highly educated and trained professionals with an emphasis on diversity, adaptability and life-long learning. Universities are increasingly required to educate a new generation of internationally competitive students, to create an environment where innovation, adaptability and change are encouraged, to encourage students to engage in life-long learning, and to make connections between global and local demands, as well as to maintain their cultural identities (Gopinathan, 1997; MOE Homepage, 2004).

We must learn to be self-reliant, yet able to work closely with others; individually competitive, yet with a strong social conscience. We must be flexible in mind and outlook to adapt constantly to a rapidly changing world. We must have firm moral bearings to give us strength in a world of shifting values. Pupils must know our common history, our vulnerabilities and constraints. They must develop a sense of shared identity and destiny. (M.O.E Mission Statement, 2004)

The Ministry of Education’s mission statement advocates the need to nurture the qualities necessary for life-long learning, whilst at the same time it positions institutions in relation to issues associated with globalisation and the information age (MOE Homepage, 2004). In an earlier speech, Dr Tony Tan suggested that the three universities in Singapore adopt an American educational system in which students study a broad-based first degree and go on to specialize in professional courses such as business, law, or medicine at postgraduate level. He stressed that the new economy demands professionals who have the ability to handle issues that cut across traditional disciplines (Quek, 2001: 6). The school of EEE acted in response to his call. In July 2001, EEE adopted a two-year common curriculum featuring elements of life sciences, humanities, technopreneurship, and management to build versatility and leadership in their graduates for new interdisciplinary work settings. The school has further innovated this year by introducing a broadened curriculum providing students with greater choices and specializations.

Concerns about innovation, adaptability and social change in the new information age seem less apocalyptic than during the industrial age. Education institutions are increasingly seen as one of the few places where society can exert leverage to bring about desired changes in the social and economic order. Present fears about "global economic competitiveness" are a good example; it is clear that for many educational policy makers, the primary task of universities in the current economic climate is to produce an educated citizenry capable of competing with other nations. However, other voices in education stress the importance of the education system in conserving social and cultural values. Both positions have been historically important to educational policy in Singapore. In its short history the government has continually had to balance the tensions of economic development, globalisation, different racial/cultural groups and the affirmation of its own cultural identity. These economical and ideological needs have been the focus of its educational policy. Singapore’s economic success has been underpinned by the assumption that high quality human resource development is a prerequisite for economic development (Gopinathan, 1997), and the school of EEE strongly endorses this assumption with regard to the development of both its staff and students.

There is a great deal of educational research available on the effect of social change on teaching and learning, not only about the ways in which students learn and the strategies that promote the kind of citizenry and learning that we value, but also on the lessons learned by earlier innovations and social change. We have used this knowledge to inform our practice, thus students today can look forward to new learning experiences which will not only provide them with an environment where innovation, adaptability and change are encouraged, but also one that encourages life-long learning. The challenge rests with us; the people involved in both teaching and learning. Since most young minds are encouraged by innovation and progressive change these concepts present exciting prospects for both the staff and students of EEE as we move forward together into the new millennium.

References

Ministry of Education, Singapore Homepage. (Downloaded May 25, 2004).

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