

For “The University as World Heritage” symposium –

Paper title:

The University as World Heritage (0099)

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Outline:

The University has been the conscience and critic of societies for many centuries. Members of the Universities, both students and staff, have been actively involved in various radical social movements in different countries. The University with its offering of the highest level of education as well as its philosophical, social and scientific engagements have significantly contributed to human civilisation.

The recent significant changes in educational environment both in the ways of organising our higher education institutions and in the forms of knowing have deeply affected the foundation of knowledge as well as our relationships to experience and wisdom. Important questions are raised:

- What are the visions of the 21st century?
- What are the visions for the future development of humanities and life?
- How can knowledge and University support such visions?
- How do wisdom, experience and knowledge relate to those visions?
- How can education and human formation contribute to those visions?
- Can University as an idea and an institution take up a great, valuable and meaningful position in the 21st century?
- How do we approach the questions of existential understanding and wisdom?
- How does experience relate to existential ideas and understanding of today?
- How does education relate to existential understanding?

These questions call for immediate and conscientious attention because the value of our knowledge, our creativity, our scientific and educative endeavours together with the space for free thinking are at stake.

Values of Universities in Human Lives

Universities with its disinterested pursuit and dissemination of knowledge have always been the foundation stones for human civilisations. For centuries, since the first formalised institution of higher learning established as early as 140-186 BC in China, Plato's Academia 385 BC – 529 AD, Gundeshapur in Persia 271 AD, eleventh century in Bologna and Oxford, or twelfth century in Paris,

universities have always been an irreplaceable source for human inspirations and development. Universities always serve as the conscience in the society. They constantly offer critiques for the different sectors in the society and the public.

The significant contributions of universities also include its scientific achievements and their influences on the society. Two of the most important transformations in human socioeconomic history, industrial revolution happened between the 18th and 19th century and the technology revolution that we are experiencing now, are closely attributed to the scientific knowledge generated in universities. In talking about those scientific achievements, we should not forget the importance and applications brought by the breakthroughs and revolutions within scientific fields (Kuhn, 1962; Braben, 2004, 2008; Beller, 1997). Einstein's theory and quantum theory in physical sciences, Feminism and Foucault's critiques of society and power in social sciences, are just some examples of the scientific influences on human thinking and actions in the world.

Universities also play an active role in social and democratic changes in different regions and countries. Many of the societal transforms were originally initiated or actively participated by university students and academic staff, such as 1968 protest in Europe, Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 in China and the present resistance against despotism and fundamentalism among intellectuals in Iran and Somalia.

This unique value enables the universities to take up a significant position in our days as far as for consolidating and develop existential and respectful understandings of life and humanities in a future perspective. No other institutions in the world can compare to the remarkable contribution made by universities to human knowledge and civilisation.

Reflection on Current Higher Education Reforms

"The University as World Heritage" Movement aims to obtain the UNESCO recognition for the significant and inestimably precious values of the universities in human history. The core values of universities and academic integrity are currently under threat in many places in Europe and in the world due to regional or national reforms which are geared by economic and financial agenda (Green, 2008; Braben, 2009; Bird et al., 2009). Essential values of universities, such as academic freedom, radical creativity, critical and revolutionary thinking, humanity, well-being, adventurous spirit and many other relevant values are seriously undermined. This will not only influence the university research activities which contribute to the creation of human knowledge, but also the quality of university education, which concerns human learning at the highest level.

Aspirations of this Movement

Drawing on academic traditions of existential philosophy, humanistic psychology and sociology, this movement aims to:

- create an open space for debate and discussion on the important questions concerning the essence and idea(s) of the University
- facilitate dialogues not only inter-disciplinary, cross-sector and cross-country, but also inter-generational and inter-cultural
- apply for the UNESCO World Heritage status for universities.

The University as World Heritage therefore is an idea to create an open space for debate and discussion on the important questions concerning the essence and idea(s) of a University, and its core spirits in the current political and social contexts, the 21st century. It aims to facilitate dialogues and existential exchange not only inter-disciplinary, cross-sector and cross-country, but also inter-generational and inter-cultural. It is hoped that this will inspire people to contact and network with care and interest in the perspective of free thinking and research, based on profound academic values and qualified existential understanding.

Through applying for the UNESCO World Heritage status for universities, this movement aims to remind people of the significant values and contributions that the University has made to the world. The University and the forms of knowledge inspired by the idea of university is one of the most precious treasures of all mankind. It is therefore that the valuable space that Universities create and represent should be recognised. It is a space that allows free pursuit of knowledge, existential understanding and high levels of education as well as protection of ethical and existential qualities of science and humanities. The core values of universities should be re-announced to the world, including all the politicians, societies and governments.

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